BASIL DAVIDSON

Turkestan Alive

NEW TRAVELS IN CHINESE CENTRAL ASIA

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE · LONDON

Frontis: YARKAND: THE CLOTH MARKET

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This part of Chinese Central Asia I have usually called Sinkiang; but sometimes I have called it Chinese Turkestan or Eastern Turkestan, or even — the name has some credit in romance, if none in geography — High Tartary. They are all one and the same place: its proper name, since 1955, is the Sinkiang–Uighur Autonomous Region of the Chinese People's Republic.

The English spelling of Uighur and Kazakh and other Turkic names — taken from a modified Arabic script — is of course according to taste, and I have used mine: Chinese names I have sometimes written by the Wade convention, and sometimes not. The photographs are my own.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD TO TURFAN

Nothing was known of the country, it was hidden in mystery far beyond the Himalaya.
SIR FRANCIS YOUNGHUSBAND

I

AFTER leaving Urumchi I went down to the oasis of Turfan; and I fell in love with the country.

This happened to me while climbing the road that goes up through the Celestial Mountains and winds down their southern flank to the desert of Takla Makan. And I suppose that is why this journey through Chinese Turkestan seems always to have begun along the road to Turfan, winding in the summer air between the granite and the snow, although it was not a true beginning but only a link in many travels, many meetings.

It is a road that echoes with the marching of forgotten men. History comes out of a long silence in this country at the world's back door; but it is good history and strong, once you have caught the stir and glitter of it, and it glows with the dark authentic splendour of unpolished antique gold. This broad pass of stones is one of the grand corridors of man. Beneath the wide eagles of High Asia, this small road has carried men and caravans for centuries past numbering, back and forth between Eastern Asia and Western Asia, China and the Mediterranean. It runs like a bright vein upon the shadowed cliffs.

Tse Yun and I had come a weary way to reach it; but now our intended resting-place was only fifty miles ahead, and we could make a good twenty-five miles an hour in the *Pobeda* (Polish made) they had lent us in Urumchi. So we stopped at Davanshin, near the top of the pass, to ease ourselves and enjoy

the pleasures of arrival. I think we should have stopped in any case, though, for all the books I had read about Chinese Turkestan seemed to come eventually to this high place, to the 'city of the pass', where a fort of mud was said to hold the gullet of the Tien Shan that channels men and goods between Middle Asia and the Chinese borderlands. And there it was upon its mound of clay; but the country was at peace, and now its moulting crenellated walls were deserted but for rooks and jackdaws, while donkeys groaned and pissed where soldiers, fearfully, had stopped walking seven years before.

Camels came sloping up the pass in line ahead. The people in Davanshin said they would be carrying cotton from Kashgar, a thousand miles eastward; they would have been weeks on the road. They had followed the interminable trail along the southern feet of the Tien Shan, of those Celestial Mountains whose tops and ridges really seem to lift the sky, and steered through the oasis cities of Aqsu and Kucha and Karashahr, and threaded themselves among the black rocks of the Toqsun gorges, and tramped with forward-nodding straining necks upward to the stones of the pass. Tomorrow they would be in Urumchi, their journey's end; but then, after a while, they would go back to Kashgar with consumer goods from China proper, with cottons and cooking-pots for the ladies of the south, lumps of iron for the smithies of Khotan, garden rakes and *ketman* blades and half a hundred other things that were not yet manufactured in those distant parts.

Their drivers kept off the road wherever they could, partly for the comfort of their beasts and partly because they feared the heavy transport lorries that were pounding up and down the road for all the hours of daylight. These drivers were the last of the professional camelmen of Inner Asia, a ragged sturdy crew of half a dozen, that I saw, who kept pretty much to themselves and spent during their journey, or so it was complained by the shopmen of Davanshin, as little as they could: no doubt, of course, because that was all they had to spend. Such camel caravans no longer cross the Gobi.

Davanshin has the glowering attraction that belongs to mountain strongholds, at any rate when you see them from far off; but on close inspection it is bleak and bare and squalid, and looks as though the storms of war had repeatedly stripped it in generations past, which of course they had; and now it owes whatever glory it possesses to a superb position beneath snow meadows that lie along the summits of the Tien Shan. Yet it is after Davanshin, southward and downward to the desert, that the beauty of Chinese Turkestan begins really to unfold: then the traveller's way is one of scenic drama.

For this is not an everyday or easy beauty. Made to be loved or loathed, this is the take-it-or-leave-it beauty of a great and savage wilderness: of crags and jagged rocks and blue sky above, and of sands beneath that melt far off into a sullen mist turning from red to violet as the day proceeds, and breathing out heat like the mouth of a furnace. For all these contrasts, Chinese Turkestan must surely rank among the most handsome and exciting countries in the world.

Beyond Davanshin, descending now, there is a black-throated gorge; and then the road comes out high above a sweltering gravel plain that slides, its skyline trembling with the desert heat, down into the empty sands of Takla Makan. This prospect is tremendous. Straight ahead, but sloping away in mirage after sky-reflecting mirage, the gravel plain seems to glow so hot that dust-flames leap and lick the ultimate spurs of the Tien Shan as they wade down into the desert, and make them burn with dull red fire. Yet high up on the western side, and astonishingly near in this chancy light, there lie the pure white snows of the peaks beyond Bogdo Ola. They preside serenely over the suffocating sand, so far below them and yet so close, and above the small red hills and the unseen cities of Turfan and Luktshin and distant Qomul.

These white mountains and red deserts are the framework of humanity in Chinese Turkestan. It is a tough country; it has made a tough people.

II

And this is also where, on going down the glacis of the Tien Shan into the smoking desert, one may begin to grasp the size and structure of the country.

This is the middle of Asia. From north to south, this is the halfway mark between the Arctic Ocean and the shores of southern India: from east to west, the long link that clasps Persia and Afghanistan and Kashmir at one end, and China at the other. It lies beyond Tibet.

It is very large: 600,000 square miles, or twice the size of Texas, or Germany and France and Italy put together; and one-sixth of all of China. Shaped like an oval bowl a thousand miles long, it consists largely of a desert, called Takla Makan, that is really a westward extension of the Gobi. This desert is encircled by tall mountains. On every side but one, the eastern side where the sands of Takla Makan flow into the sands of Gobi, these mountains march round their desert in unrelieved procession. There is nothing else like it on earth. Along the north, for more than a thousand miles, the guardian summits are the Tien Shan, dividing Chinese from Soviet Central Asia; along the west there is the sudden wall of the Pamir, barring out Tadjikistan and Afghanistan beyond it; and where the Pamir end the Karakorum, curving south, begin; and where the Karakorum end, high on this Tibetan rooftree of the world, the Kun Lun Shan begin, and the Kun Lun Shan and the Altyn Tagh — if one can still imagine those ghostly summits in all their line of march, one unendingly behind another — reach back to the plains of China.

Inward from these mountains a few rivers flow, Yarkand *darya* and Kizil *darya* and the rest, and lose themselves in the desert. They come to no good; but they leave some good behind them. Wherever they flow from the mountains and join the sands of Takla Makan they allow irrigation and hence cultivation. Half a hundred middle-sized oases, and many small ones, have long sustained humanity upon this

desert-circling fringe. Some of them were established as early as neolithic times. They became centres of ancient civilization. They grew into posting cities that linked together the two ends of the Ancient World. Their known history, going back to the third century before Christ, is neither small nor ragged.

This narrow belt of cultivation between the foot of the mountains and the uninhabitable bowl of desert is now occupied by some four-fifths of the five million people who live in Chinese Turkestan. These oasis-living people are the Uighurs, and they are mainly peasants. Above them and in strong contrast to them, living in the mountain valleys and amid high summer pastures, there dwell other kinds of people, although they too, like the Uighurs, are mainly of Turkic origin and language branch. These are stock-breeding nomads, Kazakh and Kirghiz and Uzbek and Tatar and a non-Turkic people called Tadjik; and altogether they number about three-quarters of a million.

For the last hundred years or so these peasants and nomads of High Tartary have had, to put it mildly, a stiff time of it. Little was known of them; and what was known was far from promising. A few bold Westerners penetrated the country in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly in the interests of Russian or British political and military intelligence; but their records are scanty. Until Younghusband wrote the account of his famous journey of 1887 from Peking to Kashmir, little public knowledge came from these adventures. Younghusband, true enough, went through without much trouble: others before him had been less fortunate. Schlagentweit, coming in from Kashmir, had been murdered; so had Hayward. Dalgleish, after accompanying Carey on 'one of the most adventurous and daring journeys that has ever been made in Central Asia, a journey right round Chinese Turkestan and into the very heart of Tibet', was to suffer the same fate. So would the French explorer, Dutreuil de Rhins. The only considerable Western traveller to have survived in Sinkiang, before

Younghusband's time, had been his uncle, Robert Shaw, whom the imperial government in Delhi had sent as British political agent to a lord of Kashgaria called Yakub Beg.

Close on Younghusband's heels there came the Swedish explorer, Sven Hedin; and after Hedin, Aurel Stein, and after Stein a great many archaeologists from Russia and Germany and France and Japan. Later on there were new stories of the country from travellers who managed to overcome more or less appalling obstacles to the getting into Sinkiang and the getting out again. Yet all these reports, for one reason or another, said little of the people.

The people remained unknown. For this the principal reason lay in the sheer difficulties of travel: so busy were they, these old travellers, at the dogged task of moving from A to B, deceiving high officials, corrupting low ones, dodging warlords, sidestepping peasant rebellions, and working day and night merely to survive, that they had neither time nor opportunity to throw more than casual glances at the people among whom they travelled. Perhaps they also lacked the will: either they were plotting mountains, counting Russians, or collecting antiquities, and the local populations stood like shadows in the background. So that the people emerge in nearly all these travellers' tales as grey and white figures that are never more than faintly seen. They are in fact a brilliant people in manners and in dress; but their brilliance regularly paled, it would seem, before the lurid frightfulness of travel through this land.

III

On that same leg of my journey, going down from Urumchi, Tse and I and various companions (for travel in Sinkiang tends to be a communal affair) reached Turfan before nightfall, and put up outside the city wall in a fine garden, well watered and with poplar groves sheltering a clean little guesthouse, that had once been the property of one of the lords of Turfan but was now a State farm. The choice had not been mine: with an eager

Anglo-Saxon misapplication of energy I had tried to stay inside the city wall — inside the bazaar, as the shoplined centre of any Sinkiang oasis is generally called — for it had seemed to me that having come so far I ought to be right at the heart of things, and the heart, I thought, must be somewhere near the centre. Moreover I was tired with much travel, and so inclined to be crotchety; and annoyed because there was nowhere else, they said, where one could stay.

Tse, for all that, would have none of this bazaar stuff; and he was quite right. The heart of an oasis, he pointed out, was not at the centre but along the periphery: that is where people liked best to live and work and sleep. I understood this next morning, soon after five o'clock, when clear light filtered through the pale foliage of apple saplings aloft on slender trunks, and small refreshing streams ran guttering beside them into the neighbouring poplar grove. When things go well and people are well together, life in an oasis cannot help reminding you of some kind of earthly paradise: the shade of slender trees and the sound of murmuring water, the pale greenness of it all, are a miracle of pleasure after the baleful sand and heat outside. What in cool latitudes might soon reduce itself to a miserable garden and a muddy brook is here, thanks to the bewitching sun, a kind of rural heaven.

And everyone, it seems, is up and about soon after five, tooth brushing and face washing and throat clearing and so on, squatting side by side where skilful irrigation has made the water of a stream well up into a small fountain. Already, in this grateful morning light, a blue-clad study group is forming in the garden beyond the inner wall: half a dozen people are reading a newspaper to each other. I stroll past a girl who sits beside the water of the stream: her face gleams pink as she nods good morning, and she rises to her feet, leaving her toothbrush and flannel in the washing bowl she has, and walks over to a young man who is reading by himself, astride upon a stool in the middle of a patch of fallow. She is Chinese, perhaps a girl from the coast of the Yellow Sea three thousand miles away;

but already she is an oasis-dweller with a proper respect for the morning and the evening, and a weary distrust of all those boiling nightmare hours that fill the middle of the day, especially at Turfan.

The evenings, if possible, are even more consoling. After nightfall in Turfan, when Tse and I were there, an enormous saffron moon would mount the sky as though unseen hands were pushing it up from somewhere not a dozen miles away. Towards it you stroll into the inner garden and then beyond the inner wall into the outer garden; and now the heart of this oasis beats with a rustle of wind in the poplars and the splashing of frogs as they plump into the brook, with the small swirl of water into side canals leading into gardens where subdued voices talk lazily over a last cigarette: while above them pointed poplars stand in a scissor-cut frieze across the star-filled sky. Perhaps all this is why the Uighur people — the people of Turfan for a thousand years and more — have a pleasure-loving sensual reputation. Perhaps the reputation is deserved: I rather think it is.

They have in any case — and Turfan was our introduction to it — a genius for producing the poetic moment. Out of their dust and squalor they can easily emerge as heroes, lovers, men of giant stature. They walk in the streets of an evening, and they are squalid and have nothing but their small daily lives; and then a singer goes by with a two-stringed guitar, and everyone is suddenly transformed. Men and women come up behind him and follow him; they stop when he stops; they look aside when he looks aside; they sit on a bench when he sits on a bench, quietly, respectfully, thankfully, because this man has the keys of another world, of a world where dreams and reality somehow meet. There is, moreover, nothing so good as a guitar for killing boredom.

All that is part of the grand Islamic tradition. The Arabs have the same faculty for strewing stars about their feet. And although the Uighurs of Chinese Turkestan are not at all the same people as the Arabs of North Africa, it remains true that

a common loyalty to Islam has given them a remarkably similar pattern of life. The principal mosque of Turfan is a poor affair of wood and peeling plaster with nothing of the majesty and grandeur of the mosques of the West; yet against a lurid sunset its moon-cupped minarets will yield no glory to those that hang above the Golden Horn. I imagine it was always like this. One needs only to read such careful Arab realists as Ibn Battutah, who wrote six hundred years ago of travels half across the world, to understand the venerable age of this tradition: 'In Fez, too, I ended my travels, for I had assured myself that of all countries it is the most beautiful. The poet has truly said of it:

> Ask me my proof:
> Why in the west countries you find the sweetest, best?
> 'Tis this: Hence rides the full orb'd moon,
> And thither hastes the sun at noon.'[1]

This quality in Islamic life, oasis life, of lifting the ordinary into the extraordinary, of making much of little, of turning prose into poetry, was a comfort in the swelter of Turfan. And it furnished links between Turkestan and less exotic places. On a visit to Algeria I had once gone to Tlemcen, which is the finest city of the western part of that country, and seen the famous shrine of Sidi Boumédine. This is not really an impressive structure, although it contains some good workmanship and has the patina of history upon it: but here, most clearly, one could glimpse the operation of this magic quality in Arab life. One could see how fine and cool and full of comfortable promise that distant tower, with its shadow and its fountain, must have been for a man come painfully out of the desert or the windy coastlong Tell. Arab poetry speaks continually of fountains and hills and shadows, and therefore of beautiful women, just because such things and such women are rare and always will be rare; and Uighur poetry, born in a land that is physically not much different from the land of the Arabs, but is also poor and dusty and dangerously

near to sorrow, is much the same, as many of its ballads show:

The waters of Karakhoja
Flow from shaded gardens:
And the dark-browed beautiful woman
Lights the flame of love in my heart.
My love, did you come to solace me?
Or did you come to scorch me with this flame?

Lying on your bosom
Oh my love!
I have lost my soul . . .[2]

Fountains and shadow may be rare enough in these parts; but honesty compels me to explain that the girls of Karakhoja and Turfan, who listen to this ballad and others tending to the same line of thought, are altogether a handsome lot. They wear bright coloured robes and glittering caps and scorn to veil their soft brown faces, and have much more standing with men than peasants will generally allow, Muslim or not.

Slowly the fire-fly twinkle of cigarettes dies out and disappears, and the murmuring of voices stills itself: in the soft desert night, men and women go to bed. Above a frieze of black poplars the vast improbable moon of Turfan steers off unwieldily toward the mountain tops, and looks as though it may never clear them. A rustling silence settles over us. We sleep.

IV

One dreams of making such journeys. By and large, one is wiser to rest content with the dream: it is almost certain to be better than the truth. Besides, I am a stay-at-home by nature. Yet Chinese Turkestan had long held me in my dreams; and I was hypnotized enough to admit that in this case the dreams might be less than the reality. Then, too, I had grown a habit of longing to travel there. None of my friends, moreover, thought that I should manage it: I did not think so myself. And this improbability was also an attraction.

Here was a region, after all, not yet opened to the outside world. It was exceedingly remote: it was utterly unknown. Scarcely a foreign traveller had gone through in ten or twenty years. Nobody whom I consulted in London could tell me anything new about the place. They referred me to the books; and the books were long since out of date. Some of the best of them, indeed, were as much as half a century out of date.

Only my friend Euripides, who is a Greek of Asia Minor and hence a man of learning, enterprise, and sense of history, had much to say upon the matter. But he was far from pleased. We were lunching together at the Nag's Head, in Covent Garden, and Euripides poured cold water on what he called 'romantic vapouring'. He wagged his finger at me. 'You disappoint me once again,' he said. 'First you go and waste your time in Africa. Now you will waste your time on a lot of Turks. Turks!' He raised hopeless eyes to the ceiling: we were, I should add, in one of the darker moments of the Cyprus war. 'When there is Greece, my friend, waiting for you.'

I countered: 'But I am not a man of sensibility and learning,' for I knew this Greek gambit. 'Besides, they aren't Turks. They are Uighurs and Kazakhs and so on.'

Euripides does not mind this kind of argument: in fact, it puts him in his element. He can usually go one better. He did so now: where, after all, have Greeks failed to penetrate? 'Yes, I know all that,' he agreed. 'For, unlike you, I have been there. Oh, a long time ago.' He swept aside a gesture of homage and went on to complete my list of Sinkiang peoples, striking finger upon finger and fixing me with an angry eye: 'Kirghiz and Tatar and Uzbek and so on and so on. Just as you say, my friend. But it makes no difference. They are all Turks.'

He enlarged on a favourite theme. 'An accursed people, my friend. Do you not know that? Do you not know that it was those very Turks who came between China and Byzantium? Do you not know that without those very Turks — ah, without Jinghis Khan and all such sad barbarians — Chinese influence

would have married with Greek influence? And have civilized Europe?' He gazed on me pleadingly: 'My dear friend, even Europe might have become civilized. Just think of that. Might still be civilized, even today.' And he thumped the table, which is not at all his way, for he is a man of gentle manners, and repeated: 'Even today.'

We stared at one another across the gin-and-tonics of the Nag's Head, and the sorrows of the world bore heavy on us. But then Euripides, who is not a Greek of Asia Minor for nothing, nor a fellow countryman of King Midas and Herodotus, not to speak of others of that generous ilk, went on to say: 'Of course, a very nice people for all their misfortune. They cannot help being what they are. And they make wonderful carpets; or so they used to, when I was there. But Turks, my friend, all Turks. When Greece, as I say . . .'

But I interrupted Euripides at this point; for I had one or two ideas of my own.

V

It was, I believe, a giraffe that was initially responsible. A giraffe, no doubt, is never less than surprising: but a giraffe in China, and one which landed there in the year 1414, was a good deal more than that. There has even come down to us a picture of that singular beast, haltered to a rope that is held by a bearded Arab and evidently much put out with the whole undignified proceedings:[3] after all, it must have felt terribly bored with foreign travel by that time, and its welcome, upon arriving in China, had not quite met with expectation. It had come all the way from the African kingdom of Melinda, far down the coast in what is now called Kenya, only to be announced as a unicorn (because, apparently, of a likeness between the Somali word for giraffe, *girin*, and the Chinese word for unicorn, *k'ilin*). Even the Ming emperor of the day, evidently not too keen about unicorns, had declined to signal its arrival by accepting a Memorial of Congratulation. But on second

thoughts he did go out to the Fengt'ien gate of Peking and receive it in state together with a celestial horse (vulgarly called a zebra) and a celestial stag (that was possibly an oryx). 'This event,' he modestly admitted, 'is due to the abundant virtue of the late Emperor, my father, and also to the assistance rendered me by my Ministers. That is why distant people arrive in uninterrupted succession.' He added: 'From now on it behoves Us even more than in the past to cling to virtue and it behoves you to remonstrate with Us about our shortcomings.' The revival of self-criticism and criticism in revolutionary China would obviously have met with his approval.

Now of course this giraffe did not get to China by way of Turkestan. It went by Arab ship across the Indian Ocean and eastward through the Malacca Straits to Canton. But its arrival in China was the cause, or one of the causes, of something really new in world history. For one giraffe ardently prompted the desire for another: and the following year, 1415, another giraffe did arrive, but this time together with ambassadors from its home country. According to imperial custom, ambassadors of barbarian peoples, whether European or African or any other, were always to be ceremonially escorted home again. So it became necessary to send a naval expedition to the east coast of Africa, whence these giraffe-bearing ambassadors had come; and a year or so afterwards, for the first time in history, Chinese vessels sailed beyond the coast of Arabia and put down their anchors in a properly African port. They were ahead of European mariners by nearly a hundred years.

This was the source of my own interest. I had been trying to look into the history of East Africa before Europeans first made landfalls on it. There were some Arab records, fairly well known, and then a great many Portuguese records (partly, it seems, still inaccessible); and then there was the surprising fact of this Ming fleet's arrival off Melinda some twenty years before the Portuguese, painfully crawling down the West African coast, had so much as managed to double Cape Bojador in what

is now Morocco. This arrival, it transpired, was no more than the highpoint in a Chinese–African commerce which had begun, with Arab intermediaries, as long ago as the tenth century and perhaps earlier: Arab shipmasters had begun using the port of Canton, which they called Khanfu or Sin al-Sin, as early as the seventh century. Having in mind all that it was not so surprising to hear Sir Mortimer Wheeler, after a tour of Tanganyika in 1955, saying that he had seen more broken Chinese porcelain in a fortnight than ever in his life, for in the Middle Ages the history of what was now Tanganyika had been written in Chinese porcelain.[4] The Chinese–African connection promises much to historians of pre-European Africa.

Tracing these maritime trade links, I worked back through time until I had reached the early years of the Christian era, the arrival in China of merchants from the Roman Mediterranean, and the discovery of the trading use of the north-western monsoon which could blow ships safely across the Indian Ocean instead of their having to creep along the coast. Arrived there, though, I could discover no more links by sea; and began, at first in idle curiosity, to wonder whether they had gone by land. That is how I fell upon the story of the old caravan roads through Inner Asia, and got my first real glimpse of Chinese Turkestan. This, for me, was the beginning of the road to Turfan; and it proved a long way round, but well worth it. For the story of the old caravan roads through Inner Asia, linking the Jade Gate of Chinese antiquity across Turkestan to the Stone Tower of Tashkurgan, to the Kaskmiri passes, to the northern roads for Bukhara and Samarkand, and onward to Balkh and the cities of the Mediterranean, is surely the greatest traveller's tale of all.

Of the peoples who lived along these caravan roads between the Jade Gate and the western mountains there were records, moreover, that told surprising things. Here in these oases of what is now Eastern or Chinese Turkestan, fruitfully mature settlements had existed for hundreds of years before the first Han emperors, in the second century before Christ, sent in their

armies. The people of these settlements were not only the gatekeepers of the great inland road between East and West: they possessed a civilization of their own, and one with much to claim for itself.

What richness lay concealed in these ancient oasis cultures of Inner Asia was afterwards forgotten or unknown in the outside world until the end of the nineteenth century.

> 'The idea of archaeological work [in Sinkiang], [records Aurel Stein in 1903] first suggested itself to me in the Spring of 1897, in consequence of some remarkable antiquarian acquisitions from that region. Among the papers left by the distinguished but ill-fated traveller, M. Dutreuil de Rhins, were fragments of ancient birchbark leaves which had been acquired in the vicinity of Khotan. On expert examination they proved to contain a Buddhist text in an early Indian script and language, and were soon recognized as the oldest Indian manuscript then known, going back to the first centuries of our era. . . .'

Now why should Indian relics be found far north of the great mountain barriers, and in a country that was traditionally associated either with the nomads of Mongolia or else with China? Aurel Stein, Hungarian-born inspector of schools in the Punjab, made up his mind to answer this. He secured from the imperial government and the local governments of Punjab and Bengal a grant of 9,000 Rupees (about £600 in the currency of the 1890s), and leave of absence for a year's exploration in Chinese Turkestan. His discoveries, like those of Hedin just before him, made history.

Others followed. There began an international race for antiquities from Chinese Turkestan. Stein continued his work. The Germans sent out four expeditions between 1902 and 1914: the French sent expeditions: the Russians and the Japanese sent expeditions. These bold scholars staked out 'spheres of interest' and 'fields of discovery', and quarrelled vigorously over the one and the other. By 1914 this rich mine of ancient art

had lost nearly all its treasures. They are scattered now over many museums, mostly in Europe; but the greater part of the German collection evidently failed to survive the bombing of the second world war, and may be seen now only in the coloured pictures of the published records. By a narrow margin, China had failed to save its cultural heritage in Turkestan. Nowadays it is a sad and weary sight to stare at rock-temple frescoes where these ruthless old collectors used their knives. Many of the frescoes had survived for over a thousand years: had they managed to survive a bare half-century longer they would be there to this day.

These glimpses of the past were a powerful stimulus to curiosity. And then, one asked, what had become of these peoples in the years between? Civil wars, rebellions, repressions appeared to fill their history. In the 1930s it had seemed to stray British travellers that Sinkiang was fast becoming a province of the Soviet Union; yet in 1949, it was said, the Chinese Communists had carried their revolution into Sinkiang, and Sinkiang was now a part of the Chinese People's Republic. Was this really so? And if it was, then what had become of Chinese imperial rule among these strikingly non-Chinese populations? Would they take the same road to independence as the neighbouring peoples of Outer Mongolia; or would they be content with some other status within the traditional frontiers of China?

It would be interesting to find answers to these questions; to see this land of legendary splendour; to travel where others had found their way so hard beset but so rewarding. This broad segment of High Asia, much larger than Tibet and much more various in its peoples and its history, was perhaps the world's last hidden country. But in that, of course, lay the difficulty: could one manage to get there?

Mr. Huan Hsiang, who is the distinguished Chargé d'Affaires of the Chinese People's Government in London, listened with a friendly patience when finally, in the spring of 1955, I broached the subject of going to Sinkiang. 'It is an area not yet opened to

foreign travel,' he said. 'All the same, it is also one of the most interesting parts of China. Especially now. Let us at least ask for permission.'

Permission came. On May 10th, 1956, I set out from London Airport.

The family said: 'Mind you are back for the holidays.'

oil not only from the small oilfield of Yumen, beyond the mountains to the north, but also from the much larger oilfield of the Tsaidam, beyond the mountains to the west. Others were oilmen who were working in these fields, but returned temporarily to base at Lanchow. Others were industrial engineers of one kind or another who were advising on the new industries now being founded in Lanchow itself.

One could begin to grasp what Lanchow was intended to become. Tse commented: 'After all, it is quite a big hotel, isn't it?'

'Let us discover how many rooms it has.'

'I have,' Tse said, allowing himself a small smile of contentment, 'and it has 207 rooms.'

We went early to bed, for the Urumchi plane would leave at dawn. I splashed in a hot bath, thinking it would be my last for a long time.

CHAPTER THREE

URUMCHI

They are a very jolly people, and they tell stories and sing and dance whenever they can.

MARCO POLO

I

ONCE we were over the southern tops of the Nan Shan, bare and sharp and sometimes faintly green, we were sailing clear of the mountains and could see, to the eastward, the beginnings of the Gobi. Beneath our moving shadow there spread a countryside that was painted with the grey and pink and yellow of sand and rock and solitary farms. Long tongues of shallow cultivation lapped into the desert. Erratic water-courses marked their way into the wilderness with shoals of pink gravel. One of these would be the legendary Etsin Gol.

White clouds floating along the western sky ceased to be clouds and became snowlit mountains. This moment of magical transformation was unforgettable. It was a turning of dream into reality, of promise into fulfilment: beyond those mountains lay at last the cities of Turkestan.

I wanted to tell Tse about all this; but Tse, who strongly disapproves of surprises, was fast asleep. So I explained my feelings to a soldier in the next seat; and the soldier explained his to me in the muscular accents of Hunan (as Tse discovered afterwards). But we understood each other very well, for that soldier was just as pleased as I was.

Landing at Sa'chow, too, we saw the Great Wall again. Sorrowfully crumbling, it traipsed through a mirage not half a mile from where we landed. In fact it runs a little farther and then peters out near Yumen, which is the Jade Gate of antiquity. When we took off again we flew out over its modest

watch towers and saw it for a few moments longer, a thin forgotten line still marching to the west.

The airport restaurant provided a meal which could honestly be called delicious, consisting of fried eggs and good bread, stewed meat and onions and potatoes, all well cooked; and green tea. The explanation of this European food is that many Russians come this way: there are usually one or two Ilyushin passenger planes standing on these north-western airfields, although the Soviet regular lines come no farther into north-western China than Urumchi. True enough, one end of the airport lavatory was labelled, in vast black letters, LADIES; but this was no doubt an odd fragment from the past rather than a sign of anything in the present.

When we were out over the desert, with the white spurs of the Nan Shan on our left and the vicious rocks of the Black Gobi for as far to the east as we could see (or rather, as far as I could see, for Tse had gone to sleep again), there lingered the memory of the Wall in these last heroic stages. This was the limit of the old Chinese Pale, a great frontier in history as well as on the map. It was here, on the timbers of the Jade Gate, that the camelmen of ancient Khotan and Kashmir, Ferghana, Bactria, and the Roman Empire had knocked for entry to the Middle Kingdom; and out through the Jade Gate, in exchange, that the traders and ambassadors had returned to Western Asia, India, and even Africa.

Its forts and resting stations have left close reminders of this varied past. When Aurel Stein came down from the north-west in 1907, and reached the last towers of this reed-cemented Wall, he turned up, 'together with small rags of coloured silk, fragments of wooden boards and the like as well as a little label-like tablet of wood, showing Chinese characters of remarkable clearness and of distinctively ancient look. There was no date, only the entry, "the clothes bag of one called Lu T'ing-shih".'

It was a time for walls. The Middle Eastern empires had been building them. Later on the Romans would also build them. And like these other walls, the Chinese Wall was the

backbone of an organized military defence. Along its whole length there were regular signalling systems in use, by smoke during the day, by fire at night; and its garrisons were an important part of the emperor's armed forces.

'There was a wooden label,' Stein records from the Jade Gate, 'stating that the box or bag to which it was once attached contained a hundred bronze arrowheads of a specified type belonging to the Hsien-ming company of the Jade Gate.' And another label, found near by, referred to 'the medicine case belonging to the Hsien-ming company'.

Three great desert roads took this traffic westward: one going by the most southerly oases of Sinkiang, and passing by way of Khotan and Yarkand into Kashmir and Bactria, and later into Afghanistan and India; the second taking the northerly route and making for Ferghana and later for Tashkent and Samarkand; and the third, much used only in the early centuries, passing through the ancient Chinese city of Lou-lan, now long vanished, and across the eastern end of the Tarim Basin to Turfan and the cities of the north.

Chinese control of these lands beyond the Gate was seldom more than indirect; often only nominal. For long periods it ceased to exist at all. Within the last hundred years or so, when knowledge of the world at large was opening up at most points of the compass, knowledge of Turkestan — whether Persian or Afghan or Russian or Chinese — dwindled to nothing. Rebellion and repression had followed hard on one another's heels; and gradually this whole vast region became an emptiness on the world's map. European travellers went to Central Asia with much the same feelings of awe and recklessness that they embarked for Central Africa. After the first world war, as one had seen, it was not only difficult to travel in Chinese Turkestan: it was often quite impossible. Even those who got there could seldom explain what they found. 'The circumstances of the present situation in the Chinese Pamirs', wrote the late Sir Eric Teichman as recently as 1936, 'are too elusive to be properly defined': which meant,

presumably, that he had failed to understand them. 'It seems impossible', wrote the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin a little earlier, 'to obtain any reliable information about events in Sinkiang from places outside the frontiers of the province. Not even in China is anything definite known about what is happening there.' As for what had happened since the Communists took over in 1949, nobody from the West had been to see.

We flew across the barren desert, bumping miserably, and hoped for a landing in Hami as soon as possible. For most of the way there was nothing but sand and rock, 'neither birds above nor beasts below' as the great Chinese traveller, Fa-Hsien, had said of it in A.D. 399. But then we overhauled the desert road which had long connected Sa'chow with Urumchi for occasionally desperate motorists. Along it now, making many small dark specks, I could see lorry convoys driving. Later on, when going between Turfan and Urumchi, I made two day-long counts of lorry traffic; and it seemed to me that they must be crossing the Gobi, between railhead at Sa'chow (as it then was) and Urumchi, at a weekly rate of not fewer than a thousand. The isolation of Sinkiang — of 'China's California'—was clearly at an end.

By the time this book appears the railway-building teams will have struggled through the dust and searing cold of the Black Gobi in wintertime as far as Hami and perhaps as far as Turfan: they were expected in Urumchi by 1958. Eventually they will link this Chinese trans-Asian line with the Turk-Sib railway in Soviet Central Asia. Rapidly the world grows smaller.

II

And the old ways vanish.

When I stayed in Hami, later on, I tried to find some trace of the caravan men who used to bring their beasts across the Mongolian Gobi on the desert road to Turkestan. Hami — Qomul of the Uighurs — had been their great destination.

'There are no more caravans across Ninghsia,' said Achmetjan in Hami, 'for they stopped ten years ago. At first, before liberation, inflation killed most of their trade. And now there are the lorries.' They were passing right outside our windows: one after another, spurting dust, their drivers glued to the rocketing wheels that took the shaking of the desert and wonderfully failed to break apart.

He added with a smile: 'As you see, I am a man of Hami. And I tell you that generations have gone by, and we have not seen a train. It was promised; but it did not come. Now we shall see one. We shall see one early next year, and it is the government of Chairman Mao that brings it.'

This Achmetjan, as he told me afterwards, is in fact not a native of Hami but of Urumchi. He has the stolid smiling ease of an Uighur landlord or wealthy trader; but he has not had an easy life, and is indeed something of a revolutionary. A cobbler of poor peasant origins, his habit of eating a square meal every day dates only from 1950, when he came to be what he still is, deputy head of the Hami local government.

On this first occasion, though, we stopped in Hami only for half an hour while the plane refuelled: no more than enough to remember the grateful line of oasis green along the desert skyline and to the north, high above it, those eastern spurs of the Tien Shan whose snows had for so long served as beacon to caravans emerging from the tortured Gobi.

Once in the air again we had the glinting front of the Karliq Tagh, last buttress of the Tien Shan, like a crescent moon across our path; but the plane turned westward, its shadow dark above the fleeting trees of Hami until the desert emptiness began again. Between the mountains and the desert, bare and harsh and without traces of humanity, the earth swung and trembled far below, and looked as mercilessly hot as its reputation said it was. For this is where the earth drops into the Turfan Depression, many hundred feet below sea level: the hottest place in China, people say, and what I afterwards experienced there makes me easily believe them.

This entry into Chinese Turkestan would be enthralling no

matter how one made it. All the old travellers who have written of their journeys over the desert road to Turkestan have spoken of the magic of these snows of the Karliq Tagh, and of high Bogdo Ola beyond them, floating cool and white as they crawled painfully from the desert. They have spoken of the sense of space and star-filled loneliness in this country; even from an aeroplane one recognizes that. And perhaps an aeroplane offers the closest grasp of what these Inner Asian spaces have meant to humanity. Flying in from the Gobi you have the notion of an absolutely unknown land beyond these piling ranges of the Tien Shan: these horizons, as you fly towards them, seem literally to open on another world.

And so, in more ways than one, they do. This gap in tall mountains — the shadow of your plane a black fly darting on the earth far below — is the eastern gate to a series of peoples whose forms of thought and art and religion cross Asia and North Africa in a wide band to the Atlantic Ocean. This is the eastern tip of the Muslim world.

The old trails took their way westward along the north and along the south of the Tien Shan; and so does the aeroplane. This time we flew beside the southern flank of the mountains; coming back again, in July, we flew along the north. It depends on the weather.

We saw *kariz* for the first time here. At first I took these long lines of pot-holes, marching down from the foot of the hills, for newly planted saplings; but then I saw that they usually terminated in a trench of deep green cultivation. Invented long ago in Persia, these *kariz* are peculiar to Middle Asia, being a device for conveying snow-water across sun-baked desert to places of regular cultivation. They are called wells: really, they are tunnels running four or five feet below the surface and cut from many bore holes six or eight feet apart. Sometimes they are hundreds of yards long; sometimes thousands of yards. Wherever they surface — unless, that is, they have dried up — they flourish into an onion bulb of lush green growth. For this desert goes always to extremes: either it will grow nothing or it will grow everything. Later I should see how there would be three or four houses of baked earth within each bulb of cultivation, and, within the encircling wall of these houses, simple courtyards with covered stoeps where anyone might pass a lifetime half asleep. For the good life in Turkestan depends not on wealth but on water.

I began to think of Urumchi. We should be there within three hours.

III

We arrived through a flaring storm that blew like fury down the pass, and drove my neighbour from Hunan, among others, painfully to his paper bag. But this graceless arrival was no doubt how it ought to be; for of Urumchi, in history, nothing good was known.

The old empire had called it Tihwa and used it for a place of exile. They had sent all manner of people to forgotten misery in these parts: inconvenient mandarins or criminals or thugs or Christians; and it had fallen to a reputation for sorrow and degradation where cruelty would be respectable, and fear and hatred the common rules of life. The German archaeologist Von Le Coq has in one of his books, relating to a stay at Urumchi in 1904, the photograph of a Chinese execution apparatus together with its dying victim that he saw in the street: 'a cage in which a condemned man was firmly fixed between planks, and every day the footboard was moved down a little until in the end — eight days it was said to last — death occurred . . .' Beside it in the photograph there linger — looking at the camera, not at the dying man — a listless hawker selling melons and two or three incurious passers-by. Von Le Coq was a sturdy member of the Master Race, and not given to fits of nausea: but the sight of all this, he admits, 'made a very unpleasant impression on me'.

Mr Owen Lattimore, who went through Urumchi in 1927, was not much happier. He could leave his caravanserai at

night only 'with a servant going before me with a lantern, because that is the rule, after the city gates have been closed, and both of us provided with sticks, to fend off the packs of curs who patrol the empty streets'. He mentions the mud of the streets: it was famous throughout Central Asia. Even now I should hear the old Gobi joke that Urumchi is the only city of the desert where camels may be drowned in mud.

Everything, of course, is relative. Mr Lattimore had struggled across the Gobi from its far eastern end. After weeks on camel-back he had come down from Kuchengtse, on the northern flank of the Tien Shan, by 'the fast cart service that carries mails under contract with the Chinese Post Office'. These carts, he recalls, are 'an imitation of the Russian *telega*, are four-wheeled, have no springs, and are drawn by three ponies abreast, at a jogging trot'. Mr Lattimore's *telega* must have gone at the cracking pace of a Dickensian coach after all those weeks of padding camel-back: but nowadays the bus from Kuchengtse makes twenty miles an hour, and even that seems slow.

I saw no sample of the *telega* in Sinkiang, not even at Ili along the Siberian frontier; but another horse-drawn cart of Russian origin, the *tarantass*, proved an everyday affair. It was by *tarantass* that Von Le Coq had come down from Semipalatinsk in 1904, looking for hidden treasure (and finding it): he well describes it as 'two pairs of wheels connected by a number of slender springy stems of young birch wood'. Under Siberian conditions this is rather an efficient vehicle: compared with the kind of peasant carts that we had in the partisan wars of Jugoslavia, the *tarantass* moves on oiled springs. But it is not to be recommended for travellers without a strongly developed sense of humour: they should, moreover, have confidence in their vertebral disks.

The sad tales of Urumchi grow sadder still after Mr Lattimore's time. For Mr Lattimore, little knowing what would come, was able to report in the relatively peaceful days of 1927 that 'Central Asia may be a little bit woolly about the edges,

facing: KASHGAR MARKET
next page: A 'RICH PEASANT' AND A PEDLAR OF KASHGAR

but it is not wild'. After 1929, when the great Governor Yang was gathered to his fathers in unseemly haste, Sinkiang grew wild and worse than wild. Even the sedate Sir Eric Teichman, taking a sahib's road through Sinkiang in 1936, and mindful of diplomatic repercussions to the *n*th degree, felt driven to call Urumchi 'a city of sinister repute'. He was not happy there; and this was no wonder.

IV

Even in 1956, though much of the old city had vanished beneath the demolition hammer, and good new buildings lined new asphalt highways, one could still see misery and squalor. In spite of changes which are turning it into a modern capital, there is still much of old Siberia about the place; and it lacks the stir and glitter of the Uighur cities of the southern desert. Much of it is built of clay plastered thickly on lattice frames, with an effect that reminded me oddly of the brown clay walls of Kano and the towns of the Sahara. Islam aids this impression: it is not too difficult to imagine parts of Urumchi as the sister of Timbuktoo. But then one looks upward to the snowy peaks of Bogdo Ola, and the African impression vanishes.

Tse and I were met at the airport by a colleague of Tse's in the foreign department of the Sinkiang–Uighur autonomous government. With Mr Hung we drove to a new hotel on the southern outskirts: it was, he told us, the third hotel they had built in Urumchi since 1949, and they had opened it only three weeks earlier. Over lunch he apologized for paint-blisters in the walls: lack of experience, he said, and over-much hurry to fulfil plans on time. Like other buildings of this new Urumchi, the design is standardized and unenterprising but by no means unattractive: because Sinkiang is an earthquake area, they prefer not to build above three storeys, and so they lay out wide-winged buildings and these they plaster an agreeable pink or blue. The Urumchi Hotel, moreover, has modern plumbing, and even the hot showers will often work. It has an

acing: KASHGAR BAZAAR
verleaf: BIRDS FOR SALE

excellent cook from Shanghai, and its manager, who is also *chef de protocol* of the autonomous government, is a courteous Chinese whose long residence in Saigon has given him a close understanding of the foibles of foreign customers. It is an hotel to be recommended.

In the days that followed we saw many new things in Urumchi: hospitals, theatres, university colleges, workers' flats, clubs, factories, power stations; and we met a number of the people who run them. The pace of change in Sinkiang is slower than in China proper; but it is pretty fast for all that. Yet the people in the streets were the spectacle that really drew the eye.

They made a panorama of the peoples of Inner Asia: bearded Kazakhs in leather boots and ragged blue breeches; shopkeepers in small flat-topped caps, Russian style, who might have walked straight out of old Kazan; dark Uighur girls from the oases; Kirghiz from the hills of Altai, their eyes like those of a bird of prey, clear and cold; Chinese in cotton jacket and trousers. I took to wandering through the streets and alleys before the morning's work had begun, and saw how this had been a town built for tumult and revolt. Its old dwellings turn their crude backs blindly on the street, or else confront it with iron-shuttered windows and stout timber gates. Within these gates families live in groups together, in little rooms joined to a central yard; and these, in the old days, had been miserable fortifications where they had huddled with their animals and carts and all they had. They had packed themselves close together; but at least they had enjoyed a little safety. For Urumchi had been a place of racial riot and disaster, of one rabble turned against another. The Chinese had lived within a high wall at the centre of the town; outside this wall the Uighurs and Tungans (Chinese-speaking Muslims) had lived within another wall; and beyond these concentric walls the rest of the population had fortified and barricaded itself as well as it might.

In those days Urumchi had boasted no fewer than a dozen gaols, according to Saidi Ibrahim; and I should think that Saidi would know, for as a good Uighur nationalist he had sat in one of the gaols for quite a time before 1949, and in 1956 was deputy mayor of the city. Moreover he is not a bitter man, likely to be given to much exaggeration: he is a jolly Uighur in the late thirties, wears a black and silver bonnet pushed back above his beaming forehead, and dislikes propaganda. He used to drop in sometimes for a drink and a chat towards the end of the day. He would talk about the old days.

Urumchi remained, for me, a melancholy place. Its colours help towards that: they are gravel grey and the brown of hot dry dust, the buff of mud walls, the pink and primrose splash of new buildings here and there: small faded colours for the most part, as though the place had not as yet quite succeeded in believing in its new respectability. Perhaps it is simply that in 1956 one could all too easily imagine from its surviving squalor what the miseries of the past must have been. Soon it may be too late for that: although, as Saidi Ibrahim remarked with ceremonial modesty, 'there is still much to be done.'

But already the *tarantass* and the loping camel, the donkeys and the porters, the meagre ponies and the meagre riders and the whirl and scurry of dust from heels and hoofs, the animal traction of Inner Asia, are supplemented in Urumchi by sixteen Skoda buses. And far away beyond the moonlit gravel of the Urumchi river, there are the yellow lights of a new industrial settlement.

V

We came to know quite a number of people in Urumchi. They were not melancholy. 'It is a time of transition,' said Dr Aysa of the Sinkiang Institute, an arts college which, he said, would shortly grow to university status. 'We are making progress. Things change. People also change.'

This was the atmosphere of China proper, of an all-absorbing interest not in what was nor even, very much, in what is, but in what is just about to be — now, tomorrow, for you and

me, for all of us. . . . In a time of overwhelming social preoccupation there is less room for individual worry; or perhaps it is simply that the individual worry becomes a social worry, and therefore hurts less. Those who get left behind, of course, tend to get left very far behind; and they wear a puzzled sad expression: just as those who rush ahead too quickly, and expect the millennium for three o'clock in the afternoon, soon rattle their slogans like peas in a drum. One can meet both kinds. But most of the people we got to know in Sinkiang belonged neither to this kind nor the other; but were pushing soberly ahead with their jobs. Later one would realize, gradually, that in this country of ancient stagnation the forward movement was a social movement, was a conscious shifting of whole peoples from one stage to another. But it needed time to see that.

In those first days I noticed an insignificant man who was much in the hotel lounge. I took him for a porter; but Tse discovered that in fact he was a *feldsher*, a partly qualified physician who was available for consultation by any hotel guest whose stomach might have failed him, or was suffering a minor ailment. I persuaded him to tell me his story; and it proved a story worth hearing. But to get the flavour of it, even faintly, you have to have some notion of Dr Abdel Kader as he really is. In appearance he is without polish: a short slender figure in a flat blue cap and an old suit of blue serge that is cut very much after the Russian style; to those not used to this style his bell-bottomed trousers would look absurd. Add to all this an extreme modesty of manner, and his resemblance to medical colleagues nearer home would not be obvious to any European traveller. At first I thought that his shyness might come from poverty: then I was humbled. After getting to know him better I saw that Abdel Kader was unaware of his shabby clothes: his modesty came from the fact of not being fully qualified.

Poverty is also relative. He earned the wage of a skilled industrial worker, no less and no more; and it was not much. 'But my father never wore shoes,' he said. 'My father never worked for himself.'

He had started life in the service of a Kashgar landowner, having previously managed to secure a few years at school. This landowner had paid him in kind, not in cash, and unless things had changed he would have continued in that way, he thought, until the end of his life. Then there came 1949, the year of great change, and Abdel Kader went back to school with a State bursary to help him: thence he travelled to Urumchi and studied at the Sinkiang Institute, and thence — the revolution advancing now in full flood — he went to a Chinese medical school at Sian, where he stayed for five years.

'In 1949,' he said, 'they found we had only six proper doctors and ten assistants in the whole of Sinkiang.'

How did he see the future? There were, he thought, two possibilities: either to continue as an assistant doctor — and that would be no disgrace but a useful thing to do — or else win a place at the new medical college, now being established near Urumchi, and become in time a fully qualified doctor and perhaps a specialist. He would like to do the second. Would he be able? He smiled wryly, dark eyes glowing in his thin face: he was not sure. There would be a lot of competition.

He persuaded me to visit the buildings of the new medical college. It would be opened a few months later, but early students were already at work there, and resident staff were beginning to arrive, mostly from China. We drove out to its white walls on the northern side of the city.

I should think this medical college must be one of the great material achievements of Chinese Central Asia. It is a series of well-built and spaciously ranged three-storey buildings. Dr Shao Teh, its English-speaking deputy director, told me that its air-conditioned laboratories were splendidly equipped: nothing like them had been seen before this side of Sian. They would revolutionize the whole region's approach to public health. By 1967 the college was to produce a harvest of qualified doctors, most of whom would be drawn from the non-Chinese peoples of Sinkiang. And yet this country was yesterday in the pre-medical age.

Others like Dr Abdel Kader opened windows into Inner Asia. Thanks to Dr Aysa, at the Sinkiang Institute, I was able to talk to students there; and thanks to Tse, I was able to understand them. For local interpreters failed to appear. In Peking we had told ourselves confidently that we were bound to find people who would be able to interpret into English or French; but this confidence was ill founded. There appeared instead, on our first day at Urumchi, an engaging character called Yang Shih. Mr Hung, who is a diplomat of many qualities, introduced him as 'your interpreter'. But alas, Mr Yang's English was no better than my Chinese, or not much, and developed an uncontrollable stutter after the first three words, and remained in this seized-up condition until, returning to Urumchi weeks later, we bade farewell to him. We grew fond of him in the end; and Tse would regularly lecture him on his failings, which were mainly on the side of omission rather than commission and could be traced, perhaps, to a certain absence of enthusiasm for anything that seemed like work. But Mr Yang would only smile as though Tse had said something exquisitely funny, and make up for his lack of English with a host of small kindnesses.

This being so, Tse had to shoulder the weary burden of long interpretation. He had not come to Sinkiang for that; but he frowned cheerfully and made a noble job of it. Most interpreters either fall silent at tricky moments, or else launch into round-about explanations: Tse did neither of these things. He developed a technique of his own, and would peer sternly through his glasses at any recalcitrant interviewee and pound the man with questions of his own. As we became gradually immersed in Sinkiang affairs we began to supplement each other's curiosity and memory; and there were not many subjects, I think, on which he preferred to turn his back.

We covered altogether some thirteen hundred miles by road vehicle of one kind or another, as well as quite a few miles on horseback and several thousand by aeroplane. We talked to scores of people. Most of these people — whether casually met

or interviewed at length — spoke easily of the immediate past and of the present. They invariably divided their thoughts into 'after liberation' and 'before liberation': the difference between so many things, and often enough the difference between life and death. In the end I abbreviated these, in my notes, to BL and AL. But of the less recent past they spoke with difficulty or else they did not speak of it at all. Why drag that up? Sufficient that it was gone. Only when I pressed for this, and Tse had explained why a foreigner should care to know of the happenings of fifteen and twenty years earlier, would they begin to recall their past. Often enough, then, astonishing and terrible things would be said; and anyone who happened to be listening — and in Sinkiang you are seldom without an audience — would nod their heads or shake their heads, according to the condition of their own knowledge, and grow quiet with expectation. This expectation was seldom disappointed. For these are people who have not yet lost the gift of good talk; and more than once I saw, from the way that others were moved to silence or emotion, that I was losing epic turns of speech.

VI

Old Bogdo Ola, far above, shines in the summer clouds: he is the sacred mountain of the Uighurs, or so they say, and mostly hides his pinnacles in mist. Even now, when the weather is calm and warm, you cannot see them.

Brown-bodied Uighur kids are playing in the stream that flows near by, while their mothers and their handsome elder sisters squat beside the water and hammer at their weekly wash. These women are not abashed by passing strangers; and they do not wear the veil.

Long-haired Bactrian camels tread silently along the edge of the road, carrying sacks of coal for domestic use. They have come from open-cast workings beyond the town: workings that are said to contain the richest seams in all China, but await the

coming of the railway before the pick and shovel and the Bactrian camel can be displaced.

The old and the new jostle each other unceasingly.

From the windows of the Sinkiang Institute, chatting with Dr Aysa, I can see the children and the women and the camels, and beyond and far above the gleaming flanks of Bogdo Ola. On their northern side, looking away from us, they give upon the plains of Jungaria and eventually upon the mountains of the Altai and Siberai: between here and there one would have little but the dust and grit of semi-desert travel. Out of that Inner Asian emptiness, long ago, the raiding horsemen of Jinghis Khan had ridden into Europe.

Maiti was in their direct descent. I never doubted this from the moment he pranced into the room, frowned, sat down a little stiffly, and smiled with a glitter of sloe-dark eyes and brilliant teeth. Dr Aysa said: 'Now this one comes from the Altai. He's a Kazakh and his name is Maiti.'

He was tall and slender, splendidly made and balanced, very confident of himself. His eyes were not really black, but they were so dark within their outward and upward curving lids that they seemed black; and they acquired, in smiling, a glitter as of polished stone. They were also shrewd to the point of cunning: this Lochinvar, I thought, would kill or be killed in good causes or in bad, according to the way life drove him. He would be neither soft nor neutral nor afraid. Kazakh and not Cossack (a different creature altogether) he was none the less the stuff of Sholohov's heroes: with him, at any rate, the rivers of Altai would rival the Don.

His family's pastures were six days' journey from Urumchi. To reach them, he told us, he would ride in a bus for five days across the Jungarian steppe, and then would take a horse to the foothills of Altai. In winter his family would be there: in summer they might be miles away among the high pastures.

'What does he mean, take a horse?'

Dr Aysa bubbled with laughter. He himself is an Uighur from Turfan and he never takes a horse, although he may, at

home on leave, sometimes take a donkey. 'These Kazakhs have many horses. They live with horses.'

Maiti nodded. He was beginning to investigate me with much the same curiosity as I was investigating him. But he answered questions according to the rules of hospitality: that is, he answered them carefully, and his eyes glittered with a tolerant interest. There were seven in his family. They had possessed, before the liberation, fifty sheep and seven horses. Now they had sixty sheep and ten horses and one camel and two milch cows. Why this improvement? Because, said Maiti, prices had improved, taxes were lower, military service was ended.

'Land reform?'

No, of course not: no land reform in the stock-breeding areas. They were working 'in the direction of co-operatives'.

Dr Aysa said with a chuckle: 'Some of those Kazakhs, I can tell you, have thousands of head of stock'. The herds were not being pooled.

What had the liberation meant to Maiti? Security, it seemed, and education. He went into this at length. Before 1949 he had gone to a primary school whenever that was possible — mostly in the winter months when the families were gathered together in the valleys of Altai; but in 1949 he had managed to enter a junior-secondary school (13 to 16 age-group), although he himself was already sixteen. After three years there he had done well enough for his local authority to secure a place for him at the Sinkiang Institute. Next year he would complete his five-year course in mathematics, and graduate as a schoolmaster.

'He is a typical case,' said Dr Aysa. 'He would have gone on watching the herds otherwise. Now we have just managed to catch him, and he is a clever one. You can see that. Of course, he's still behind. Lots of them are. But they are catching up. We are all catching up.'

The good Dr Aysa is a modest man who loves his work: he sees no limit to the possibilities. 'That boy, you see — he's a

member of the last generation that's partly lost. We can't catch them all, we haven't the means. But the next generation — the children who now are six and eight and ten — they'll find it different. We'll have the means for them. We'll have colleges and teachers. We'll have experience.'

This optimism is rooted in fact. Eight years before, Sinkiang had fewer than 200,000 children in primary schools, a proportion much lower than most African colonies. There were 9 secondary schools with fewer than 8,000 pupils; and no means of higher education, because the Sinkiang Institute, although founded twenty years earlier, had never aimed above the secondary-school level. This was a colonial area of great backwardness.

But now, in 1956, there were over 400,000 children in primary schools, and about 36,500 in a total of 63 secondary schools. There were 4 institutes of higher learning either founded or founding; and these, by the end of the year, would have about 3,500 students of whom most would be non-Chinese.

'So you see, we are doing something here.'

After Maiti, there came a student of a different kind, a brown-eyed dreamy-eyed peasant lad from remote Khotan, far in the west, who listened and smiled and dreamed and found it hard to put his dreaming into words. He was a good contrast to the Kazakh from Altai: here were the two extremes of these many peoples — the brilliant hard-riding herdsman from the great snow mountains of the north, and the easy-going Uighur from the oases of the desert.

Osman Türde was the son of a poor peasant, landless until 1952, who had somehow managed to get himself from Khotan to Urumchi (a fortnight's riding in a bus) and was learning the pianoforte. Whyever the pianoforte? Well, everyone had chosen an instrument and so he had chosen the piano. Everyone? Well, everyone interested in music, you understand. . . . .

Dr Aysa burst out laughing. 'Why not the pianoforte,

please? Are we thought to teach only politics and politics and politics?' Dr Aysa has quite a grasp of the world situation.

Osman Türde opened another window on Turkestan. For if Maiti had behind him the ringing harness of the steppes, Osman Türde possessed in his lineage the ancient history of Khotan. Where Maiti was pale of skin and sharp of bone and feature, Osman was dark and tender, almost Indian. Through twenty-two centuries his ancestors might have seen Euthydemus the Bactrian Greek, or intermarried with the men and women of Northern India and Kashmir, or met the armies of the Han Dynasty as they came into Khotan after months and even years upon their westward-probing way. Behind Osman's dreaming there would lie the folklore of many hundred years.

The snow and the sand of Turkestan have made two kinds of humanity. Maiti and Osman: they are startlingly different, but they share a history that is woven deep into their lives, a history they are at last beginning to remember.

VII

Three of us were strolling in the public gardens at Urumchi. This was where the celebrated Lin Tse-hsu, a century earlier, had built his palace and dug his fish pools and planted willows and flowering shrubs, and consoled himself for the exile he had earned after burning the British opium at Canton. Faced with British invasion, the imperial government had thought well to lose sight of Commissioner Lin for the time being, and had banished him in 1842 to govern Sinkiang. But after his death they had canonized him according to the saintly possibilities of Confucian belief, for he had tried to save China from the scourge of opium. The palace he built in exile, a fairy-tale building of high-peaked eaves and porcelain gods and demons, is the only building of old Urumchi with any claim to be remembered.

T'uan, a gentle Chinese who is native to the city, had shown

us round the gardens. We had inspected a revolting little zoo. We had watched a game of basket-ball. We had drunk tea. We had spoken of Lin Tse-hsu. T'uan said a little hopelessly: 'In that pavilion there is an exhibition of modern plans'. We entered the pavilion wearily, for there is nothing more wearying for me (and I believe for Tse also, although of course I did not ask him) than an exhibition of modern plans. Within that dragon-guarded palace we stared at plans and projects until T'uan said: 'There is also a museum of antiquities. It is upstairs.'

We went upstairs and met Usman Jan.

Later on we came to know him quite well, and he too could open a window on Inner Asia. A rubicund and smiling man, he is from Hami, the most easterly of all the Sinkiang oases and the hinge of two great communities, the Chinese and the Central Asian. We looked around Usman Jan's little museum — 'next year we are going to build a proper one, the plans are already approved' — and saw his coloured reproductions of the rock-temple paintings from Kizil and Bezeklik, and his cases of porcelain from China, and his odds and ends. But mostly we listened to his story.

Such personal stories began casually, with a chance remark here and there; but little by little they would develop until everyone gathered to listen. Then there was often the feeling of a long and long-hidden history unrolled before one's eyes; and perhaps it is always like this in times of great change. Ordinary people like Usman Jan remember they have a past and therefore a future, and they cease to be ordinary.

'I had some schooling in my childhood,' he said, 'although my father was a poor peasant who worked for payment in food and not for money. But they saw that I was not stupid, and in 1941 they sent me to a teachers' training school at Urumchi. I was eighteen then.

'But nothing prospered, for that was the worst time of the bloody Sheng Shih-tsai. Exactly how I cannot tell, I became a

pupil in a school for training police officers.' He shrugged his shoulders and looked to see how we should take this: we should not think that he had *chosen* to serve the Kuomintang. We nodded tactfully.

Those were years of militant nationalism among the non-Chinese peoples of Sinkiang. Revolt was in the air. It seeped even into the police officers' school, and it reached Usman Jan. He acquired 'subversive literature'. It consisted of Soviet history magazines — 'I liked reading history' — and a pamphlet, written from a leftwing standpoint, attacking the Kuomintang.

'These things were found in my possession. So they took me and asked me whence I had them. When I would not say they beat me, made me kneel for hours on pieces of small coal, put me in cold water to the neck and that in wintertime, but they got nothing from me. So they threw me out of the prison and out of that training school, and I was free again.' After many ups and downs, he had finally come to rest in 1955 as curator of this little museum. He smiled happily: his was a story with a happy ending.

It was not much of a collection; but it was the first of its kind in Sinkiang. Usman said: 'People are collecting for us.' He showed me six silver coins. 'They were found in the ancient city of Karakhoja last year. In a box of unknown substance taken from a tomb. The peasants brought them to us.'

These dull-glowing coins lay in the palm of my hand, thin silver wafers from the past. On one side they had a wild king's head and a script I could not recognize: on the other an altar with two attendants. After returning to London I showed drawings of them to Mr John Walker at the British Museum, and Mr Walker immediately identified them as Sassanian coins of the sixth century A.D. But for Usman Jan they were still a mystery, and yet more than a mystery: they were a pointer to a long and splendid past in which he, an Uighur of Hami, could take pride. No longer a despised 'turban'd head' — the Chinese

equivalent of 'nigger' — he belonged now to a people that was also a nation. And this nation could look back on famous men and famous things.

Tse and I went down to Turfan; and glimpsed the reality that lay behind this modest but determined claim.

CHAPTER FOUR

TO THE WALLS OF KARAKHOJA

What may yet be found in China only a bold man would predict.

HERRLEE GLESSNER CREEL

I

OUR host in Turfan was Niadze Mehmet, chairman of the town council, a tense and energetic Uighur who spoke Chinese and had, I believe, a strain of Tungan in his recent ancestry. We got to know him over supper in Turfan's new municipal restaurant. Candles flickered in the covered courtyard: they softened the knife-hard lines of Niadze's energetic profile, and blurred the gathering of white-robed men who ate at small wooden tables, and gently persuaded us that what we most wanted in the world was to go to sleep. That first night was a sleepy introduction.

We had come down by the highroad from Urumchi, through Big Wind Pass and its black-throated gorges and across the grey glacis that reaches to the small red hills and the desert sand; and for me, at least, this was stepping over the threshold of Turkestan and closing the door behind me.

All day long we had passed the trucks that link Sinkiang with China: they had swung up past us, one after another, with their backboards drumming and their dust erupting through our windows. They would make the journey from railhead across the Gobi in five days and nights, thirstily, exhaustingly: each carried an inner tube, for water, that was slung upon a cross-trees beside the cabin, and their drivers, as they went by, had upon them the remote paralysis of men who have stared ahead until nothing but the road can matter any more. These silent figures stay in my mind, their faces grey in the swirling dust,

their peaked caps like helmets: they had the touch of the true heroic about them, for each of them, on that immense road from railhead through Turfan, was driving history into Sinkiang. But now, in Niadze's municipal restaurant, they seemed remote: even the memory of the fluttering surveyors' flags, pinned to the rock all through the pass, and marking where next year's railway line should go, had lost their power of connection. I felt, just then, inseparably part of Sinkiang.

Niadze was proud of his municipal restaurant; and with reason. Turfan had never seen its like before. They had built a series of little rooms round a wide courtyard, and this courtyard they had roofed high with matting so as to shield customers from the heat of the day. Its supporting pillars of trimmed poplar they had painted white and then overpainted with red and blue ornamentation. Now, in the evening, its customers were pale shadows in the light of candles and of one or two paraffin lamps. It was a gentle reassuring scene; and even the damp meat balls and the merciless boiled mutton of Turkestan took on another flavour for a time.

Niadze spoke in whispers, no doubt in honour of a foreign visitor: the first, it seemed, that anyone could remember. His thin face was a pattern of vertical lines, cut across the top by the flat blue peak of his official's cap in a way that emphasized the self-confidence and authority he seemed to have. He reminded me of peasants I had known during the war, of obscure and modest men who had grasped authority and grown overnight into leaders of other men: a tough and incorruptible character, this Niadze, I would guess, and in Turfan, at any rate, there would be no fooling with the petty cash, no fiddling of municipal supplies. A peasant among peasants, he would speak their language, share their expectations, know their hopes and fears. He would be one of those numberless many who carried forward the Chinese revolution: another proof, if one were needed, of its deep-probing popularity. In the days that followed I came to respect this tense and modest man, and learned much from him.

He took it quite as a natural thing that one should wish to see antiquities; and he knew a little about them too. There were, he rightly said, three known places of antiquity in the neighbourhood of Turfan: one of them, Yar-koto, was distant, but the other two, Bezeklik and Karakhoja, were near by and also close together. I knew this well enough; but I listened to their names, on the tongue of this Turfanlik born and bred, with the satisfaction of a traveller who has reached at last the place where he would be. This hearing of exotic names is one of the pleasures of travel: later there was the same sense of fulfilment when we crossed a river above Kashgar, and Mamud said in his sighing voice, Kizil *darya*. From here to the Oxus, and beyond, the word for river would always be *darya*: but it is one thing to read *darya* on the map, and another to have the long soft vowels in one's ear.

Before going out to Bezeklik and Karakhoja we had a day of wandering in the bazaar and talking to people; and when evening came Niadze took me to see where some of the famous grapes of Turfan are grown upon a near-by hillside. We strolled among the long vines and admired the cucumbers, fat and green, that were now in season, and the small red plums they also grew. The chairman of this newly formed co-operative said that before the liberation they had seldom grown more than 150 lb. of grapes to a *mou* (one-sixth of an acre): now they could grow an average of 700 lb. or more. It was all a matter, he explained, of being able to use available water to the best advantage. I thought of distant Kao P'ei Tien, on the outskirts of Peking, and of its chairman Hsin Ch'ing: this bearded brown-eyed Uighur in his long white grown and little skullcap was very different from the solemnly precise Hsin Ch'ing, but the things he was telling me and the things that he and his co-operative were doing and achieving were very much alike. The everyday reality of Sinkiang can never have been so close to China proper as it is now.

Evening came in long cool twilight. Niadze and the vineyard chairman had relapsed into sleepy conversation of their

own; people were moving home to bed. Even the naked children had ceased to think me strange and possibly dangerous, and yawned in the dust near by. A woman came to me through the shadows with a capful of plums and emptied them into my hands. They spilled and the children scrambled for them lazily. I sat down on the bank and the earth smelled warm and good. I was moved with a pleasant dreamy happiness: I was here at last, and it was good to be here.

Along the edge of the hill, against a darkening sky, the vine rows climbed and fell. They too stood for history. They had come here with the Greeks, a full two and twenty centuries ago.

II

Next morning, going up to Bezeklik along the Simgin gorge, we saw our first rock temples. They were gaping holes in the cliff, fifty feet above the new trunk road to Hami. We stopped the Gaz 69 we were travelling in — it is a superior sort of jeep, Soviet made — and scrambled up to them. In one of them, a high arched cavern cut from the rock a thousand years ago, I found the little that remained of a superb fresco whose *motif* was none other than the vine. This grim valley, now having not so much as a blade of grass that I could see, had once been a place of pilgrimage, famous throughout Middle Asia and filled with people.

Soon after six o'clock we had taken breakfast of meat balls and bread balls beneath the tall awning of the municipal restaurant, Niadze's pride and joy, and started on our way before the sun was warm. The whole of this tract of land, around Turfan, is well below desert level, and reflects the heat of the Central Asian sun as though it were a brazen bowl: its boiling fury is notorious in China. But Niadze affirmed that it was still rather cold in the Turfan oasis. He wore a thick jacket and a muffler and, I believe, thick underclothes; and even so I have seen him look cold in the middle of the day. 'In August,' he conceded, 'it does get hot here'. Yet by noon, that May, I

would be gasping like a fish out of water. Niadze thought it rather affected of me, but was too polite to say so. Whenever I complained of the heat, he would smile and raise a thin eyebrow.

For twenty-five miles eastward from Turfan we held to the main desert road with the summits of the Tien Shan on one hand and the bubbling gravel of the desert on the other, and made a bold and swirling forty miles an hour as far as the narrow oasis of Karakhoja. Beyond this the road swings up left-handed through the Simgin *eris*, the valley of the Simgin river; and almost at once, high in these chickenshit hills, you begin to see the man-made caverns for which the valley is famous.

Yet it must always have been a barren sort of place. All these little foothills below the Tien Shan are bare and ochreous and extremely hot, the withered stamping ground of some monstrous brood of fowls; and even the sunbaked people of Turfan and Karakhoja call them the mountains of fire. But still you see, far above, the white meadows of the Tien Shan and perceive more easily than usual why those cool peaks are called celestial.

We were quite a party, for the people's authorities of Turfan were delighted that a foreigner should wish to visit their antiquities; and as well as Niadze there were two committee members and a girl from the Bureau of Antiquities in Urumchi, a shy Uighur woman in threadbare clothes who worked with Usman Jan and was engaged, I believe, in some long-range project for the preservation of what may still be preserved. They were proud to show off the splendours of their land: they were like decent poor people who had come into a fortune, but were determined not to let it turn their heads.

A few miles up the Simgin valley we turned off the road and bumped across a barely worn track that led up into a narrower gorge. Here we had to mend a log bridge after which we charged uphill over deep dust tracks until, some twenty minutes

later, we came within sight of a steep cliffside, and saw, in a long terrace, the temples of Bezeklik.

III

The history of this long tract of Middle Asia has vigour and importance for two reasons; and they are both exciting.

Across it, little by little, the two great civilizations of the Ancient World, Chinese and Greek, had approached each other and at last met. Out of this meeting, as well as out of their own genius, the native peoples of the country had evolved a culture of their own; this culture was like nothing else in the world.

What the Greeks had known of Middle Asia, at any rate before Alexander's march to the East, was nine parts myth. Herodotus, writing a hundred years before Alexander, has a list of peoples to the eastward: the last of these were the Hyperboreans, 'whose land comes down to the sea'; and the last but one were the one-eyed Arimaspians, who lived 'beyond the griffins who guard the gold; and perhaps the one-eyed Arimaspians were the people who lived in the oases of Sinkiang. Then Alexander of Macedon crossed the Oxus in his great thrust into Asia, and founded his city of Alexandria-the-Furthest, what is now Khojent, on the banks of the Jaxartes river. Even here he was still to the west of the Pamir; but instead of pressing farther eastward (into lands, that is, of which his Persian victims knew little or nothing) he turned south and crossed the Hindu Kush into North-western India. Yet the trade routes certainly went across the Pamir into Sinkiang even in those remote times; and perhaps Alexander sent spies and pioneers to inspect what lay beyond.

His Bactrian Greek successors certainly did. Exchanges became regular with the Further East, and Greek writers spoke now of the 'silent trade' between western merchants and eastern merchants that was done at the legendary 'Stone Tower', thought to have stood at Tashkurgan in the High Pamir.

Greek settlers from Asia Minor, and even from Greece herself, began flowing into these newly conquered lands. They brought much with them, altered much they found. Their capital in Bactria, Balkh, became 'Queen of Cities', 'Paradise of the Earth'; and its buildings covered sixteen miles.

> 'We have to think,' says Tarn, 'not of the Afghanistan of today, but of a second Babylonia; a land of irrigation canals, where the Oxus and each of its tributaries were utilized to the utmost for cultivation, where Merv was the centre of one vast garden, and where the Samarkand district . . . was such a rich complex of water courses and husbandry that its river . . . was known to the Greeks as . . . "the most precious".'

Eastward along the golden road to Samarkand there travelled new men and new ideas, and in these cities of what would later become Turkestan they founded a Greek civilization.

The first and greatest of the Greek kings of Bactria, Euthydemus, probably crossed the Pamir early in the second century before Christ and entered the important and independent kingdom of Khotan. Whether Euthydemus possessed Khotan or merely traded with it, he certainly knew it, and through Khotan he also knew China. This way, and at about this time, nickel was brought out of China to the Mediterranean; and Bactria was the pivot of exchange.

For the Chinese, meanwhile, were pressing in from the east. Their vigorous Han Dynasty emperors united the homeland of China and pushed armies into the troubled borderlands; and in 128 B.C. their first great ambassador to the West, the notable Chang Ch'ien, came after many adventures to Ferghana on the western side of the Pamir. He followed where nameless traders had already led; but after him came the armies of the Emperor Wu-ti. By 121 B.C. these Chinese armies had established themselves as far as Lop Nor, at the eastern end of the Takla Makan desert. The little oasis kingdoms of the southern desert put themselves under Chinese imperial protection; and

in 106 B.C. regular caravans began to traverse this Central Asian road between China and the West.

And then, for more than two hundred years (and with only one important break of some thirty years after A.D. 25), there was regular if difficult communication between the world of Rome and the world of China: and it remains a grand coincidence of history that Rome and China, during those two hundred years of contact, were each in the full splendour of its age. 'The traffic', says Herrmann, 'developed incredibly fast. Every year up to twelve caravans, of which each might include 100 men and many pack animals, left the homeland' for the long journey westward through the Jade Gate and across the deserts that lay beyond.

These slow-moving caravans joined the two ends of the world together: they marked the beginnings of a unity of civilization throughout the world that would still be growing to maturity for another two thousand years. But they also brought new life and wealth to the peoples of the Turkestan oases. Chinese enterprise saw to it that these should prosper: already they had gained much through trade with the peoples of North-western India, beyond the Karakorum, and with Bactria and Ferghana beyond the Pamir, and now they would have regular contact with the Chinese too. They offered staging posts along these great 'Silk Roads' between East and West, and they must have given shelter to a wonderful chaos and confusion of tongues and travellers: the German archaeological expeditions after 1902 found documents in no fewer than seventeen different languages and twenty-four different scripts.

> Chinese influence became paramount. 'Colonies of military cultivators [says the *Hou Han-shu*, written in Han times] were established in that fruitful country. Along the great roads, and at determined distances, resthouses were set up for the changing of horses and the refreshment of couriers. In every season there passed bearers of urgent messages and interpreters from this part or that part. Those who came for trade, foreigners or not, struck daily on the gates that these might be opened to them.'

These oasis peoples had already ceased to be primitive. When the Chinese came with their thirst for information and their habit of precise reporting they found — say the Han annals of 30 B.C. — that the oasis of Kucha had as many as 21,000 men capable of bearing arms: even the smallest of these 'kingdoms', Wen-su (Uch-Turfan today) had 1,500 possible soldiers, while Khotan, the most important of them, is recorded in A.D. 100 as having 30,000 men who could be called to war. Behind these figures lay wealth and substance.

There survives from this period the poem of a daughter of a Han emperor who was married to one of these remote kings:

> To the world's end I was married,
> My lord is the King of Wu-sun:
> To his strange tents I was carried,
> With fleece their walls are hung . . .[7]

She had 'mutton for food, and the milk of mares'; and she was not content. The diet of Wu-sun, which became Ili in the country of the Kazakhs, has not altered to this day; and nor have their 'fleece-hung' tents.

By the third century A.D. Chinese influence waned with the decline of the Han empire: this became, in southern Turkestan, the period of Kushan influence exercised from the Indian side of the Karakorum. Already these oases had a culture of rare complexity and unusually broad range: now it was widened again. For Buddhism came northward over the mountains out of India, and won the oasis kings and their peoples before moving on to China. The imperial couriers might fail: the traders and the priests still toiled along the desert roads. In this way, as archaeologists would find some two thousand years later, the Greco-Buddhist art of the Hindu Kush, of Gandhara, passed through Central Asia into China.

Out of the desert sand above a long abandoned oasis, east of Khotan, Aurel Stein picked up a seal fifty years ago. It is a seal with two faces: on one face it bears an unmistakable Greek head, perhaps of Pallas Athene, and on the other a well-stamped Chinese character. But the document it sheltered was written neither in Greek nor Chinese, nor yet in Latin nor Persian, but in Kharoshthi, script of the Kushan rulers of Northern India. Here, in unique juxtaposition, the leading cultures of the ancient world came briefly together.

IV

Although these links were soon broken by upheavals in west and east, the oasis peoples of Eastern Turkestan continued to evolve their own peculiar hothouse culture. They had practised irrigation from time immemorial: it was the condition of their presence here at all. They had absorbed successive waves of nomad invaders from the north and east, and last of all the war-like Tochari, fleeing after 178 B.C. from their lands in Kansu. Now they settled down to exploit all these contributory riches; and for several hundred years after the period of east–west contact there was sheltered here a wealthy and fantastic theocratic feudalism. It is from this time that the great rock monasteries date: the temples with their brilliant frescoes and their secular extravagance.

When the Chinese again re-established themselves in Eastern Turkestan, under the great T'ang emperors of the seventh century, new peoples were already pressing out of the wilderness into the 'earthly heaven' of these envied oases. Kashgar and Kucha may seem bare enough now: to the nomads of those early centuries they stood for everything that was glamorous and lush. And the latest and most powerful of these nomad peoples, as the T'ang generals found, were a Turkic people from the Mongolian steppe who would call themselves, a little later on, Uighurs.

These Uighurs were a military people, but receptive of new

ideas. Like the Tochari long before them they knew a good thing when they saw it; they took to settled life and established their overlordship in most of the Turkestan oases. Nobody knows how many they were; but they were enough to stamp their ways and their language on the peoples whom they found. From the fifth or sixth centuries onwards, the culture of Eastern Turkestan is primarily Uighur.

They found a strong Buddhism and a numerous priesthood. The great Chinese traveller, Hsuan Tsang, who travelled this way early in the seventh century, said that there were tens of monasteries and a thousand monks in Aqsu alone: the king and his councillors met twice a month but discussed what they meant to do, before they did it, with the heads of the monasteries. 'The people', comments Hsuan Tsang, 'in general are cunning and greedy, loans are often transacted between father and son. Virtues are not treasured but wealth is worshipped.' Fa-Hsien, passing through three centuries earlier, had come to much the same unkind conclusion.

What this lavishly decadent feudalism could really mean was displayed for later generations in the famous rock temples of Kizil and Qumtara, above the Kucha oasis in the foothills of the Tien Shan. Here, beside the smooth Greekish Buddhas and the vineleaves and the twirling ornamentation, arrogant and shining with their wealth, were paintings of knights and princes and sumptuous women: the men with thin curling moustaches in the Sassanian style, and the women with long gowns and wimples and fine jewellery about their wrists and arms.

> 'At first sight [writes Le Coq of the "knights' fresco" in the temples above Kucha] the benefactors' pictures remind most vividly of pictorial representations in Gothic mortuary chapels. The men stand with legs far apart, balancing themselves on the tips of their toes, in their long coats made of brocade or wonderfully embroidered, with a three-cornered cape. They wear the knights' belt of metal disks and, hanging from this, a long straight sword with a handle

in the form of a cross, and a rounded or flat pommel amazingly like the European swords of the Carlovingian or early Gothic period.

'Near the knights stand the ladies, all in tight bodices cut low in front, with bell sleeves and a little bell-trimming on the pointed front of the bodice. They wear long skirts with trains, and their bearing recalls strongly that affected position with shoulders drawn back, and body forced forward, that may so often be seen in European paintings from Holbein to van Dyck.'

Such was fashion in Eastern Turkestan some thirteen hundred years ago.

One need not take the European echoes too seriously: Le Coq could never really believe that a good thing might originate anywhere than in Europe. What is certain is that these Uighur knights and ladies took the measure of their manners and their dress from Sassanian neighbours to the west.

And yet these rock temples were not Persian. They were Chinese and Indian and Sassanian and Uighur in a special synthesis of their own. They were Buddhist, but they were also Manichaean and Nestorian. And they spoke of heaven and earth in many different ways. Beside the knights and ladies and the Buddhas and the Boddhisattvas one may enjoy the pleasant dreams of monks who longed for lotus pools and ladies of their own. Having none, they drew and painted them. In these remote and solitary temples of the Tien Shan the carnal damsels with their breasts as big as footballs, their nipples a mere milkless point and their bellies opulent and round, still dance in pencil nudity. Or so they would, if only old Le Coq had let them be.

V

There remained, I knew, little of all this splendour in the many temples of Bezeklik. But it was said that something remained; and we climbed down from the dusty cliff-top, high above the gorge of the torrent that runs beneath the monastery terrace, with a warm anticipation of seeing it.

Niadze said: 'It's this way', for he had been here before; and went slithering into the shin-keep dust of the sloping cliffside. After ten or fifteen feet of this we came to rest on a wide shelf; and along this shelf, curving inward over a couple of hundred yards, were the cave-mouth openings of the temples of Bezeklik. Five yards away the cliff dropped another hundred feet or so to the bed of the gorge.

No doubt other travellers have been here since Le Coq quit Turfan in 1905; but I know of no more recent description of the temples. They are several hundred years later than the best of those at Kizil, above the Kucha oasis; dating from the ninth and tenth centuries they show that Chinese influence, strong after a long period of T'ang imperialism, was dominant here. They must once have been a marvellous sight: even the little that remains from archaeological theft, administrative theft, ordinary theft, and natural disaster (for this is an earthquake region), shows you the glimmer of brilliant Buddhist frescoes while you walk from temple of temple along this astonishing cliffside terrace; and the shadow of faded blues and greens and golds within the ragged entrance halls.

Their position is authentic 'Shangri La'. Le Coq says that he reached them in 1904 'by an eagle's path' and that they were hidden from view by 'specially built walls' — now quite vanished — so that I imagine he came along the bed of the torrent and climbed the cliff to reach them. Having done that he found himself in a world of murals depicting Indians, Syrians, Turks, Tocharis, Chinese, Uighurs, that fairly took his breath away; and he forthwith set about carving them out of their plaster beds and preparing them for transport to Berlin. Nobody hindered him nor raised objection; and he himself was the last man to worry about the morals of removing them. He gave seasonal employment, as it happened, to quite a few people in Karakhoja and Turfan. Now it is sad and sickening

to see where the murals that still remain are mutilated by those great excisions: sadder still to reflect that they went to Europe and were there assailed far more explosively than by any possible earthquake in the Simgin gorge.

'Stolen', Niadze said. He said it wherever we came across a large and painful excision; and he said it often. 'Stolen', repeated the girl from the Bureau of Antiquities. And 'Stolen' added the driver of the Gaz 69. It was quite a refrain; and I felt vicariously ashamed. But Niadze, perhaps to make it a little better for me, said that the Kuomintang had also taken a hand in this looting.

They felt aggrieved; and they were right. When I got back to London and was looking again at the Stein collection in the British Museum — tucked away in a corner with little room to explain or reveal its unique value — I wondered how long it might be before Europe would be asked to disgorge some of these treasures and send them back to the peoples whose property, in the eye of history, they really are. Meanwhile, the poverty of means of the British Museum is a national scandal. But I failed to inform Niadze of this; I think it would have hurt his feelings. It would certainly have hurt mine.

These temple paintings show that Eastern Turkestan was by no means, in those early years, the benighted place it would become. The oases were larger than in modern times; the irrigation more efficient; the peasants more widely spread and perhaps a little better off. Yet the few Chinese records that remain show this Uighur feudalism, at any rate up to the tenth century, as a society ruled by a princely caste in partnership with a numerous priesthood, beneath whose double burden these peasants of the Turkestan oases appear to have endured much the same poverty and ill-rewarded toil they continued to endure through all the centuries until now.

Buddhism, coming over the passes from India, had long settled on this country with the same despoiling hand that Lamaism would later rivet on Mongolia and Tibet. What this must have meant in everyday life is shown with startling directness in some

of the documents that Aurel Stein turned up at Dandan Uiliq near Khotan. Two of these, with dates corresponding to A.D. 782 (or about the same time as Hsuan Tsang's no less damning memoir), 'are bonds for small loans specified in copper cash or grain issued on interest to different borrowers by one Chin-ying, who is designated as a priest of the Hu-kuo monastery. As security for these loans the borrowers, whose names and ages are appended together with those of certain relatives as sureties (mother and sister, wife and daughter), pledge the whole of their household goods and cattle irrespective of any valuation'. The monks, in other words, financed their monasteries and their superior way of life by usury and extortion.

Only a revolutionary desire for an end to priestly servitude can explain how Islam could spread so rapidly through these ancient Buddhist lands. Before its fiery prophets and their puritanical promise of freedom, driving over the western mountains in the tenth century, the monks and their usury would vanish in a handful of years. Yet the temples were not destroyed. They remained with their frescoes, even after the monks were gone, as gleaming witness to a strange glory.

Islam, in its own time, fitted well enough into Uighur feudalism. It failed to change the relationship of landowner and peasant; and the servitude revealed so clearly in the T'ang Dynasty bonds of Dandan Uiliq was to be renewed, as *chakar* labour, in the centuries that followed. And *chakar* labour would not end until 1950.

Beyond the terraces of Bezeklik we could see a screen of poplar trees, sheltering the little village of Murtuk where Le Coq had made his headquarters for a time; but the rising sun pressed hard on us, so we climbed the cliff again and mounted our Gaz 69 and returned down the Simgin gorge to Karakhoja. Even a thousand years ago it can have taken those well-fed monks only two or three hours by donkey: they were not so ascetically shuttered from the world as later generations might

think. For Karakhoja then was one of the great cities of Central Asia.

VI

It is a dilapidated ruin now, its high walls and many houses long since blurred and rubbed away by erosive wind and sand, but showing still an outline of magnificence and dignity. We reached its walls through the little Karakhoja oasis, shady and stream-fed and pleasant after the grilling heat of the Simgin rocks, with strolling girls aflame in red and green and purple cottons, and marvellously handsome children playing in the dust, and families traipsing homeward with a single donkey; and came abruptly to its high archway gate. Here the walls are still twenty-five feet high or more, and as you go through that archway you see the vaguely retained shadow of a city. In reality there is nothing here and nobody, but for a single farm in the brown wilderness where a patch of rice lies green and fresh; yet for a moment as you enter there is the illusion of seeing a past that is still alive. The illusion vanishes: the sun and the sand devour it. This was Karakhoja; now it belongs to the desert.

Karakhoja and Qomul, which the Chinese call Hami, were the twin capitals of the early Uighur princes. These were the first earthly heavens they came to on their journey out of the savage lands to north and east. From these they impressed their mark on history — in its way a rather grand and splendid mark; and pushed westward to Kucha and Aqsu and Kashgar and the oases that lie beneath the Karakorum and the Kun Lun Shan. Later on, in the thirteenth century, the generals of the Great Khan came down with irresistible cavalry out of Mongolia (whence long before the Uighurs themselves had come, and before the Uighurs the almost legendary Tochar people), and made an end of their pride and substance. Turned from the martial rigours of their once nomadic life, the Uighurs proved easy game.

Through centuries after that this land endured the small vicissitudes of Central Asia. It was too wide and far away to suffer except briefly a close imperial control from China, whether Mongol or Ming or Manchu; but it was also too remote to feel much modernizing influence. It missed the great achievements of China. Its Buddhist glories came to an end, but nothing replaced them: Eastern Turkestan produced none of those Islamic masters who raised the shrines and towered domes of Merv and Isfahan and Samarkand.

Its oases dwindled; and probably its population also. Those who were established in the great desert lost heart against the sand and withdrew from their pioneering clumps of green. Nothing, for example, remains of the great administrative city of Lop, not even as much as remains of Karakhoja. Yet the city of Lop had served under the Han emperors as an administrative centre of importance: placed near the shifting and shallow Lop marshes into which the Tarim flows, at a crossroads in the desert between the northern and the north-western roads to the west, Lop had long endured. It was already a thousand years old when Marco Polo passed through in 1280 or so; and Marco says of it that 'Lop is a great city at the gates of the great desert. . . . Those who pass the desert rest in Lop for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts: there they take victuals for a month for themselves and their beasts'. But Lop has vanished from the map.

Qomul, or Hami, had better fortune. Although it has nothing great to show, its importance has survived as a staging post on the road from China to Sinkiang. The Polos, or at any rate Marco, seem not to have passed through Qomul, but all three of them saw much of Sinkiang in the closing years of the thirteenth century, and they saw it as a prosperous and contented place.

Even then, though, the levelling effect of Islam was little more than a memory. Kashgar, Marco writes, 'has many fine gardens and vineyards and possessions, and many merchants who travel the whole world, and also many poor people who

CHAPTER SIX

RED TARTARY

When I think of the past that we have known, I weep for it.

YUSUF KHAN OF KULDJA

I

In the quick thunder of cavalry skirmish and squalor of ambush without mercy and in partisan wildness and in Kuomintang horror, in cruelty and counter-cruelty, this revolt of the Three Regions had the grandeur and misery of a true war of liberation. So much soon became clear; but the story remained difficult to put together.

Many had seen their fragment of the fighting, but seen it as a whole; and often enough these wholes would not fit easily into one another; and certainly some things eluded us altogether. It was all set, too, on an epic plane: not simply because these people are fine and fluent talkers but also because of the kind of life they knew and the way they saw it. Revolt and war were part of their legend: physical courage a virtue prized very high. For me, listening to these stories, there were many reminders of Serbia during the partisan wars: just as Serbian peasants called a brave man *junak*, hero, and meant it in a literal and marvellous sense, so would these people call their brave men *bator*, and mean by it the same superb quality of courage and warlike cunning.

'Abdul Reni bator, yes I followed him,' said Hali Abak on one occasion, but reverently. 'He taught me what I knew at the beginning. He was not an army leader: no, but he was a hero.'

Or else, it seemed, one would glimpse repeatedly the hard-riding stuff and fabric of Sholohov's tales of revolution and counter-revolution on the banks of the Don. The people who live

above the head-waters of the Irtysh and the Yenisei are not Don Cossacks, nor any kind of Cossacks, but they have the same qualities, I would guess, and pretty much the same values. They conducted their revolt in the Three Regions of Ili and Tachen and Altai with the same simplicity of purpose and crudity of method. They were men of much the same simplicity of mind.

Many told us of their part in it; but Yusuf Khan gave us its beginning. We met him, towards the end of our stay in Sinkiang, on the first floor of the new government offices at Ili, where he occupies a responsible post in the Ili–Kazakh autonomous government; and Yusuf Khan, when he learned of my interest in the revolt, invited us to dinner.

At fifty-eight he considers himself an old man, for it seems that this is part of Kazakh modesty; but in fact he is strong and spry like a giant in the prime of life. His handshake is as quenching as you might expect in a son of nomad ancestors who has spent more hours in the saddle than most of us have spent in bed. His colouring is that of stained but highly polished oak, his eyes are dark and handsome, and his expression is benevolent but stern. Even when indoors he follows Kazakh custom in wearing on his sparse grey hair a cap of plum-coloured velvet that is stitched with gold and silver ornament.

He began formally. For years, he said, they had endured the misery and oppression of Sheng Shih-tsai. Then, in the autumn of 1944, Sheng went away and there followed him the Kuomintang; and the Kuomintang would not be better but worse. 'The people of all our nationalities', said Yusuf Khan in his hard old voice, 'would not endure it. They would not put up with any more. . . .

'When you are as old as I am,' he said, smiling a little in self-mockery, 'it is not easy to think that death can stand higher than life. No no, it is not easy.' And he threw out enormous hands and stared round at us and laughed ponderously at himself; and his eyes of dark blue stone glimmered with his memories. 'Well, but I did think so, and many thought so. We

could not endure our lives. We were ready to fight.' How much and how well they had fought was seen in the sequel, for this haphazard Kazakh cavalry had swept before it an army many times their number, had overridden machine guns and field artillery, had driven far to the south.

'And now I sit here, an old man in a young country. And I am at peace when I think of that.'

II

Even as early as the autumn of the year before, in 1943, a few brave souls had pulled their rifles out of the thatch and gone up into the hills. Ideas, after all, are no respecters of frontiers; and the three northern regions of Sinkiang marched with the frontiers of Soviet Central Asia, and many people went back and forth. The armies of the Kuomintang might more or less easily dominate the Uighur oases, but they reached with difficulty into the mountains of the north, and then, as often as not, only with the trembling arm of native mercenaries.

But the few brave ones of 1943, for all the encouragement of Soviet victories in the west and Chinese Communist successes in the east, were only a portent of what was coming: it needed the events of 1944 to drive men through their hesitation.

Yusuf Khan had needed no driving. A minor tax official at Nelke, some eighty miles east of Ili city, he knew the misery of the times because he dealt in it. He was forty-six in 1944, and had thought his active days were over; but when it came to the point he found himself among the first who stormed the police post at Nelke and afterwards the gendarmerie post, and rode in triumph through the shin-deep mud, that wild October, waving captured rifles to the credit of revolt.

Nelke was the sign that people waited for. 'We had no programme. We wanted only to be rid of the Kuomintang. But others thought as we did, and all took courage.'

News travelled on Kazakh ponies. Small partisan groups joined into loose military formations: leaders emerged: new

ideas were in the air. On November 12th the city of Ili was taken after three days' fighting with Kuomintang troops bottled inside it: some of these got away to the south, but others surrendered with their arms. Peasants came in with their knives and *ketmans*, sharp hoe-like spades, and the outline of an army began to shape itself. Outlying garrisons were reduced or driven out. Within three months the whole region of Ili was in rebel hands.

Of this fighting in the mountains of Tien Shan we heard from Dr Mussojan.

III

While Mussojan was speaking of this we were with him in his yurt at Balak-Su, in upland pastures a hundred miles into the Tien Shan west of Ili city. Through the open door of the yurt we could glimpse Khan Tengri and his neighbouring peaks as they moved above us in the summer clouds. The wife of Mussojan brought tea and dried melon seeds: apart from looking after their children she also worked as a medical orderly in Dr Mussojan's field hospital. Like him she was dark and good looking; and, like him, much of an independent mind. They were very well together; and everyone liked them.

Mussojan himself is an attractive laughing Kazakh of absolutely bull-headed determination: he could not otherwise have come to be a doctor through the years of terror. 'We Kazakhs of the Tien Shan,' he said, 'suffered much from Sheng. We all hated him. My brother-in-law was murdered by him in 1938. But perhaps we hated the Kuomintang still more.'

When news of the insurrection in the villages round Ili city reached them, they were more than ready to join it. 'I joined on November 19th, a few days after we knew of the taking of Ili city. Then I picked out the best of the horses we had in our family and rode for the rendezvous — most of us joined like that. They made me a partisan commander.'

He pointed toward tooth-edged peaks that were white across the horizon. 'Our local Kuomintang tried to get away to Aqsu

and south Sinkiang through the Shah T'eh pass. Twenty-one of them, from the district magistrate to the policemen and a handful of soldiers.

'We knew the country better than they did. We sent thirty men after them, but only four had rifles. These men got ahead of them, riding hard, and stopped them in the neck of the pass where the path goes over a wooden bridge, and took them all.

'After that we carried the revolt right through our Kazakh country to the north of the Tien Shan passes.

'That was winter, and a hard time. Those of us who came through it were as lean as wolves. Then many went down into the plains and joined the Three Regions army there.'

IV

In the plains they found newly formed regiments of this Three Regions army — Kazakh cavalry and Uighur infantry for the most part, but poorly armed and worse equipped — standing on the Manass river in the Jungarian steppe between Ili and Urumchi. These may have numbered, early in 1945, as many as 40,000 men; the men I talked to said that they received no arms or equipment from across the Soviet border, although, of course, Kuomintang propaganda was soon claiming that they had.

How otherwise explain, in Chungking, the tearing success of this revolt? Kuomintang reinforcements from China proper, supposedly good troops brought up under General Hu Tsung-nan, had failed to drive the rebels from their hold on the Manass river. Although the Kuomintang may have had about 100,000 troops [15] in Sinkiang by now, stalemate ensued; and for a time both sides sat upon their positions and awaited what should happen next.

What did these rebels want by now? Here one could mark the difference in maturity from earlier revolts against Chinese domination: they wanted self-government for Sinkiang but they also wanted social change. To that end they had set up in Ili

city a government whose number and composition seem to have varied according to circumstance. Hali Abak, deputy secretary-general of the Sinkiang-Uighur autonomous government in 1956 and a rebel from the beginning, told me that its largest membership was forty-three, but fell sometimes to as few as twenty-five. Men would come and go because there was need to carry revolutionary ideas to other parts of Sinkiang; and there were casualties.

As the revolt proceeded its originally nationalist bias seems to have leaned steadily towards a social revolutionary bias; although the full story of these complicated years is far from clear. Its government originally had a president and two vice-presidents: an Uzbek called Ali Khan Türe, an Uighur called Hakim Beg, and a Kazakh called Abulkhair Türe. When I asked Hali Abak what had become of Ali Khan Türe, he said that he thought that he had died in 1947; but in a later conversation he added that Ali Khan, 'having fallen sick and because he had relatives in Uzbekistan, went there for medical care; and some say he is still there'. I do not know what became of Hakim Beg; but Abulkhair Türe, the Kazakh, was one of those who signed the abortive treaty with the Kuomintang in 1946: and when I was in Ili they told me he was still living there, though now past eighty.

This Hali Abak was also a man to remember, a hard and perhaps implacable man in his early forties whose initially grim suspicion that I must have unconfessed reasons for asking questions about the time before 1949 — the time for which there were no easy signposts to point what one should say — broke down only after much conversation. Once he got going, though, he sometimes forgot his textbook phrases and gave us vivid pictures of those tortured years. Now and then at our meetings, as though struck by something he had said himself, he would open wide his cold brown eyes and pause, and stare at me eagerly; and then, as though recalling that the thing was past and done, go on with his story again. In the end he came even to the point of talking about himself.

'I was a student. . . . I listened to Abdul Reni bator and I went to fight at Ili. . . . We had few arms, but we were not defeated. . . .'

I do not know at what point Hali Abak became a revolutionary: I should think at the time he listened to Abdul Reni. But after the front was stabilized along the Manass the Three Regions government — as it was now called — assigned him to the Department of Public Security, no doubt a grim enough assignment in those years; and later on, as he told me, he went into the Altai where, in 1953, he became deputy governor as well as a leading Communist official.

'At the beginning,' he said, 'we proclaimed in Ili an Eastern Turkestan Republic' — another separatist successor, that is, to the 'Republic of Kashgar' of ten years earlier — 'but after the peace treaty with the Kuomintang of June 1946 we dropped that title and we buried our separatism.'

Peace with the Kuomintang, or at least a truce, was reached with great difficulty. Far away in Chungking, the Nationalist Government (then negotiating with the Communists in China proper) had recognized the need to negotiate with the Sinkiang rebels as soon as General Hu had failed to push them from the Manass river; but the gap between thought and action remained wide.

Local obstruction by Kuomintang nominees in Urumchi might have killed all chance of negotiation: but the speed and violence of the revolt were too much for them. They could count on increasing support from the '*begs* and *bais*' — even from those who still nursed private hopes of running a separatist Sinkiang in their own interests — but by now the peasants of the oases were also joining the war. By the last months of 1945 partisan formations, perhaps helped from Tadjikistan and perhaps not, had appeared in the far western mountains; the revolutionary movement swept doggedly forward.[16]

The Kuomintang sent up a special commissioner with orders to make peace on the best terms he could. Negotiations began in September 1945 between the Three Regions government

and this special commissioner, General Chang Chih-chung; and were eventually, though briefly, successful. General Chang himself was by no means an extremist — he was still an army commander in 1956 — but his instructions and his colleagues combined to make life difficult for him. Yet peace was signed in June 1946; by General Chang on one side, and by three revolutionary leaders, Akhmedjan Kasim, Abulkhair Türe, and Rakhimjan Klojaev, on the other. Essentially, this treaty established minority rights such as Sheng had promised in 1933, and had partially conceded until 1937; and it also provided that the Sinkiang provincial government and assembly should be composed both of Kuomintang nominees and of nominees of the Three Regions.

Yet these agreements were never honoured by the Kuomintang. A few political prisoners were released; others were held fast in defiance of the treaty, and it was not long before men were being re-arrested. Beyond the neighbourhood of Urumchi, where the Three Regions government (thanks to its troops along the Manass river) still had influence on the Kuomintang, there were appalling reprisals against those who had taken up arms. In a last frantic blood bath the Kuomintang tried wildly to save itself.

V

Even in 1956, travelling through the far western oases below the mountain frontiers of Kashmir and Afghanistan, we came upon quick memories of all this.

I remember a day on the road from Yarkand when we had paused in the noontime heat and found shelter beneath wayside trees. We asked a handful of peasants, reclining beneath these trees, where we were. They said it was Kizil and there were nine hundred families; but who were we? Ah, then we should take tea with them; we should honour their house.

We followed a vigorous old woman who carried a bowl of

yoghourt through the outer gate of a high roughstone wall and into the house-place within a second wall; and were joined by her husband and two younger sons, or perhaps grandsons. Our driver sat on his heels in the shadow; Mamud and Tse and I were given rugs on the sheltered veranda. Beyond the low western wall we could see the first ranges of the Pamir and beyond them the peaks over Tashkurgan that hang above the frontier of Tadjikistan.

After a while the old woman came with bowls of tea and watched us with the satisfaction of the naturally hospitable: her face was bronzed and beautiful within a pale blue scarf and once she must have been strikingly handsome. Her fresh white teeth were those of a girl's, and when she walked she had the grace of a dancer.

She and her husband answered our questions. No, they had received nothing during the land reform: they were middle peasants, almost in the category of rich peasants. . . . Yes, they had joined the co-operative movement, everyone in the oasis had joined it. . . . Of seven sons three were working and two were at school, and one of these would now go to a secondary school. . . .

Our talk languished in that noonday courtyard. Only when I asked who had controlled the water, before liberation, did they perk up a little. Two men had controlled it, they said smilingly: one in Yarkand and one in Yengihissar, landlords both, but now they had a *mirab* appointed by their own committee. . . . No, there was not enough water, but now it was divided fairly, whereas before the two landlords had taken nearly all of it. . . . Clearly it was a long settled question: one of the sons, bored with our talk, got up to slip away.

Then I said: 'Was any man from here in the revolt?'

When they understood that question — through Tse and Mamud — they came at once to life. The husband grinned and looked at us keenly; the boy turned back again and sat down; the old woman's face glittered with a sudden excitement: they talked vigorously to Mamud. 'They say,' he

facing: KASHGAR: COVERED STREET
next page, above: WOMEN'S LITERACY SCHOOL
below: KASHGAR PEASANTS: IMPROMPTU DANCE

said, 'that many went, that every family of Kizil sent a man to fight, that thirty from here were killed in the revolt, fighting as partisans'.

It was the old woman, now, who spoke for them. Some brave ones, it came out, had organized the young men of Kizil and the young men had gone *up there* — she nodded towards the mountains high above the low western wall — and had joined with the young men of Tashkurgan and had formed partisan bands. Many had fought for two or three years. All the country round Yarkand and Kizil and Yengihissar had known them. (In fact, as other records show, these partisan bands were active all round the great western curve of irrigation, from Khotan in the south to Aqsu and Karashahr in the north.[16])

After the peace with the Kuomintang — she meant the short-lived treaty of 1946 — some of the young men had dared to come back. Among them were three of their leaders from Kizil and these the Kuomintang, in spite of the peace, had arrested and shot. Afterwards I learned the names of these three obscure heroes from Mehmeti Min, secretary of the Kashgar local government: they were Hasan Hadje, Savet Küre, and Ashim. In being shot they were luckier than some others whom the Kuomintang laid hands on at that time. At Aqsu, according to Mehmeti Min, they took Lutpila Motalip, another Uighur leader, and murdered him most brutally together with many others. At Kashgar they took Abdurrahman Eminov and buried alive several score of his active followers. In the area of Tashkurgan they beheaded twelve rebels, including one of their leaders, a Tadjik called Guljaman. . . .

VI

But all these and many other murders availed them nothing. For the truth by this time was that the Kuomintang were facing in Sinkiang a coherent and determined revolt which had realized, at long last, an effective unity among all these Sinkiang peoples. Although Communist leadership grew strong in

facing: YARKAND – HATTERS' CO-OPERATIVE
overleaf, above: THE MAN WITH THE TAMBOURINE
below: YARKAND – EMBROIDERER

the revolt it none the less seems to have united men and women from all social classes except the landlords and traders of the big oases and some of the wealthier stockbreeders: in this the Communists here seem to have shown the same unifying skill as in China proper.

Uighur and Kazakh, Tatar and Uzbek, Tadjik and Kirghiz: they were all involved, and their leaders seem already to have seen their future as an integral part of revolutionary China, for little is found after 1946 of their original separatism. The separatist cause in Sinkiang, always a volatile and doubtful quantity, seems to have remained after that with none but a handful of notables who wished to separate Sinkiang not so much from China as from revolutionary China; and this handful, with Masud Sabri and Yolbaz Khan and Uzman and a few others, disappears quickly after 1949.

What the majority wanted was being said with increasing vigour in 1946 and 1947 even though the truce was badly ruptured. 'In this province,' declared Akhmedjan Kasim, foremost of the revolutionary leaders, in February 1947, 'it is impossible to keep the peace by repression, bribery, betrayal, and fraud.' They wanted decent government. They wanted equality of rights, civil liberties, social and economic advancement. 'The enemies of our people', said Akhmedjan in that memorable speech, 'are not the people of China, but those few among them who are for government by repression, for imperialism, for the denial of people's rights.' [17]

These were not mere words. When Akhmedjan spoke of 'people's rights' he had an understanding audience. For at that very moment, as everyone knew, the prisons of south Sinkiang were crammed with men whose crimes, precisely, were the wanting of 'people's rights'.

'The expression "Eastern Turkestan",' Akhmedjan went on, 'does not mean that we advocate an independent Eastern Turkestan. It means solely that the people have finished with the former policy of oppression and do not want it to continue. . . . The problem of our day is to make sure both of unity among the nationalities and of democracy in Sinkiang.' It was a very up-to-date pronouncement.

The Kuomintang clique in Urumchi, aping its superiors elsewhere, stuck to the last to their doctrine of racial superiority. None of them put it more clearly than an historian called Li Tung-fang, writing in Chungking in 1945, who explained that the Uighurs were descended from the Huns (the Hsiung-nu), that the Huns were in turn descended from the ancient Chinese, and there was thus no real difference in 'nationality' between Uighurs and Chinese. He was spelling out in greater detail the Chinese racialism set forth a little later by Chiang Kai-shek in his book, *China's Destiny*, where all the peoples of China were described as belonging to a single 'Chunghua (Chinese) nation'. But the days of the Kuomintang were numbered.

By September 1949 divisions of the People's Liberation Army, having occupied Kansu, were ready to cross the Gobi and, if necessary, fight their way into Sinkiang until they could join with their allies of the Three Regions army. No fighting proved necessary. The Kuomintang provincial commander in Urumchi, General T'ao Shih-yueh, broadcast an appeal for 'peaceful liberation', and others followed him in declaring their readiness to serve under the Communists.

A few hesitated; a handful said no. When I was in Hami a man from Barkul told me that the local Kuomintang garrison had refused to follow General T'ao's orders to 'change over': some of these troops rioted on September 28th, three days after T'ao's broadcast, and burnt shops in protest — he showed me what he said were ruins from the burning — but this local Kuomintang resistance disappeared when it became known that the revolutionary authorities had appointed the pro-Kuomintang Yolbaz Khan as administrative chief of the Hami region. What old Yolbaz then did with that authority was to be another story.

Within a few days advanced units of the People's Liberation Army had arrived in Urumchi to meet a strong detachment from the Three Regions army, commanded by a Tatar called

Marhop; and a joint victory parade was held in Urumchi. At the same time two regiments of the Three Regions army, under an Uighur called Imenov, pushed southward through the Tien Shan by forced marches and entered Kashgar without opposition.

Thus the Chinese revolution flooded into Sinkiang not on the bayonets of an invading army but as part of the task of making peace. It came in not as a foreign product, possibly hostile, certainly difficult to adapt, but as the reinforcement of a strong popular movement already in existence. It found a revolutionary-nationalist movement in which Communist influence was paramount but not exclusive. And it also found, in the Three Regions government and its army, and in the prisons that were now flung open, many people of the country whose lives had long prepared them for responsibility in carrying through great social change.

In all this, it would seem, Sinkiang offered the Chinese Communist party much easier problems than Tibet would offer a little later on; for in Tibet the Chinese revolution would find no native movement of revolt, nor any clear alliance except by gingerly compromise with quasi-feudal monks and feudal lords. This infinitely more complex and populous Sinkiang (having perhaps five times the population of Tibet) would take to the Chinese revolution with simplicity and belief: beyond the ramparts of the Kun Lun Shan, by contrast, the Chinese would meet with fear and suspicion. Tibet had changed little in structure since the reforming days of Tsong-kapa in the fourteenth century: Sinkiang, for bitter years, had thundered with the toil of revolution.

Yet almost at once the Sinkiang revolution lost four of its leaders. Akhmedjan Kasim and Abdul Kerim for the Uighurs, General Skah Beg for the Kirghiz, and General Dalelehan for the Kazakhs — these last being generals of the Three Regions army, not of the People's Liberation Army — took off by plane for Peking to celebrate the founding of the new People's Republic, and were killed when their plane crashed into a Manchurian hillside. Another delegation was hastily got together under the leadership of Saifuddin, an Uighur pro-Communist who was eventually to become chairman of the Sinkiang autonomous government in 1955; but the loss of four tried leaders and especially of Akhmedjan, evidently a man of rare wisdom and maturity, must have been a sore blow.

Most of the Kuomintang officials carried on. Burhan, a wealthy Tatar trader who had occupied a carefully moderate position between conservative nationalism and support of the Kuomintang, took over chairmanship of the provincial government and would later become a deputy prime minister of the central government in Peking. General T'ao ceased to command the Sinkiang garrisons, but stayed as second in command of the Sinkiang military region, a position he still held when I was there in 1956. Most of the Kuomintang provincial troops, as well as the Three Regions army, were progressively incorporated into the People's Liberation Army or else sent home. With one small but interesting exception, there was peace in the land.

VII

The exception was brief but colourful.

When Yolbaz Khan, the 'Tiger Lord' who was now around his seventieth year and duly set in his opinions, accepted nomination from the revolutionary authorities as administrative head of the Hami region, in September 1949, he was not won over. He had long served the Kuomintang, and had much on his conscience. Many hated him for his betrayal of the earlier revolt of 1931. Lastly — and it was this that seems to have urged him into armed resistance — he evidently believed that miraculous help from America might somehow still rescue the Kuomintang, or perhaps enable such men as himself to achieve in Sinkiang the same 'independence' as Chiang Kai-shek had just achieved in the island of Taiwan.

In February or March 1950, at all events, Yolbaz with a

small group of Kuomintang soldiers rode out of Hami into the Tien Shan, crossed to their northern flank, and later rendezvous'd at Barkul with another counter-revolutionary leader of like opinions, a Kazakh whose name was Uzman. These two notables, Uighur and Kazakh, began trying to collect men.

There are varying accounts of Uzman. The late Ian Morrison, a correspondent of *The Times* who was in Urumchi as late as August 1949, went up to Uzman's yurts in the foothills of Bogdo Ola, to the north-east of Urumchi, and described him later as having 'a large powerful face, long black moustaches and beard, a prominent nose, rather light brownish eyes, an arrogant mouth'; remarked that he had at the time, or was said to have, about seven hundred men; and added that his claims to power and glory should not perhaps be taken as gospel truth.[18]

Hali Abak, who had fought against him, put it more bluntly. 'Uzman was not a civilized man,' he said. 'He was a brigand without principle or political understanding; and he was also a tool of the Kuomintang.'

My own impression is that Uzman resembled some of those Serbian *chetnik* commanders whose love of power and loot, during the second world war, betrayed them without much difficulty into collusion with the German or Italian armies in Jugoslavia. They too were strong-drinking and strong-swearing characters, firm planted on the peasant earth (although Uzman, of course, was not a peasant), good with horses and good with men, collecting easily a band of reckless followers, promising them everything, giving them a little now and then; and leading them, infallibly, to perdition. They could not understand the revolutionary ideas that shook their country; they felt themselves carried away, as their leader Drazha Mihajlovich (a man of better stamp than they) had said before his execution, by 'the wind of the world'; and there was no place for them any longer. In a world of serious change, Uzman and company were without employment.

The point is worth making because there was some attempt,

later on, to present Uzman as 'an ally of the West' and a genuine Sinkiang separatist. He was neither, of course, in any serious or consequential sense. But the point is also worth making because with the passing of Uzman there also passed the time of all the other Uzmans, of all those boot-and-saddle heroes of Middle Asia who had swept through history, with whips cracking on the wind and the clatter of horses, ever since the Mongol hordes first cantered into Europe.

His career had been typical of all those other nationalists who dithered during the second world war, in occupied countries, between hatred of the invader and an even greater hatred of a revolution they could not understand. Uzman himself began by throwing in his lot with the revolt of the Three Regions: through the bloody cavalry skirmishes of 1944 and 1945 he had justified his title of bator. But then the revolt proved too much for him, and altogether a stiff and responsible affair; Uzman changed sides, and joined the Kuomintang against the rebels. He secured control of the Altai hills; but then, after many vicissitudes, was chased out by the Three Regions army — according to Hali Abak, who was in command of that Three Regions force — after fighting which lasted from September 19th to October 19th, 1947.

Uzman fled south across the Jungarian steppe and took up headquarters under Kuomintang protection in the hills near Urumchi, where Ian Morrison and two American companions would find him nearly two years later.

Even after the peaceful change-over in Sinkiang of September 1949, Uzman continued his resistance: perhaps from belief that the revolution would never tolerate him after all the blood that was shed, and perhaps from other reasons too. Earlier on, at the beginning of the American airlift to Chungking, the United States air force had established weather stations in useful places. One of these was at Sa'chow, at the western end of the Wall, and the man in charge of it was a sergeant of marines called Douglas Mackiernan. Now in 1949 this Mackiernan was at Urumchi as an American vice-consul;

and it is generally asserted there (though I was never offered any proof) that Mackiernan fed Uzman with money and promises, and possibly with arms. It is certainly true that the unfortunate Mackiernan took to his heels just before Uzman's second revolt, at the time of the peaceful change-over in Sinkiang, fled south into the Tibetan mountains, and was there murdered out of hand by Tibetans who 'did not know who he was'. A little later the revolutionary authorities in Urumchi arrested the then British consul, a former missionary called Fox Holmes, declared they had found dynamite in his cellar and circumstantial evidence of links with Uzman, and expelled him from the country. Thus ended the consular outpost that Sir George MacCartney had established for Britain in China's far north-west some sixty years before.

Whatever promises Uzman may or may not have had, or believed he had had, he almost at once declared war on the new regime in Sinkiang, and gave a good deal of trouble all through that first winter of 1949–50. By the spring he had linked up with Yolbaz, coming up from Hami, and added a few more men to his own lean and desperate band. But now the snow was melting in the passes; and within weeks the revolutionary army, operating from Urumchi and Hami, had caught and smashed them. Even so, some hundred of these Kazakhs, including women and children, got away south across the desert to the hills of the Altyn Tagh; and it was from there they set out on their long march through Tibet and Kashmir that brought them finally to Turkey, where they now are. Uzman and Yolbaz and a few more got raggedly away across the desert by another route, fleeing to the neighbourhood of Tunhuang, the site of the Thousand-Buddha Caves. Not far from here Uzman himself was taken in battle; he was then brought back to Urumchi and executed. Yolbaz, for all his advanced years (and he must have been a remarkably tough old man), seems to have got clean away to Lhasa; thereafter he disappears without trace.

Of the last of these Kazakhs in Uzman's following I caught

a glimpse, by hearsay, from Rewi Alley who had chanced to be at Tunhuang, looking at the famous murals with Dr Joseph Needham, when some of them had come in from their flight across the desert. 'I remember they came up to us and began arguing the toss, among themselves, whether or not they wouldn't kill us. A fearsome lot, they were. Some of them wore brass buttons in their hats to mark the number of people they had killed. And they killed right and left: men, women, and children — it was all the same to them so far as I could see.

'We came on a case that was right in their line. They'd left behind a lad who was one of their number, because they thought he was dying. Luckily for him, an old Mongol woman took him in and saved his life. In return he shot her as soon as he was well, stole the little money that she had, went off to a neighbouring farm and shot the peasant and his wife and stole their horse, and rode after the rest of the band.'

But in Sinkiang, at long last, there was peace. It was narrowly in time. For this was a country, by now, that was dying of its wounds.

VIII

Many told me this; but it was Dr Tadeyev Habibullah, in Yarkand, who really brought it home to me.

Habibullah is a slender Uighur of middle age: he wears the traditional black and silver bonnet, and his thin-boned face, a little quarried with the smallpox of childhood, has the colour and texture of a crinkled olive. He has the eyes of one who has stared on horrors for too long; and his voice is sad and tired. None of this melancholy is unexpected. To become a doctor had required a superhuman effort: to survive as one had required another. I doubt if Habibullah, whom I came to know and value as a friend, has ever had time to draw breath and enjoy his own achievement.

He was born on the far side of the mountains, in Soviet Kirghizstan; but his father, being a native of Sinkiang, had

returned with the family in 1932. Soon afterward a handful of Soviet medical workers had come to Kashgar, and young Habibullah, who knew a little Russian, had decided to study as a pharmacist. Through the years of peasant revolt and Tungan terror and Chinese counter-terror, Habibullah had somehow managed to complete his studies: then, in 1936, Soviet doctors had arrived for duty at the Kashgar general hospital and encouraged him to stay on and qualify as a *feldsher*, an assistant-doctor. These Soviet doctors were obliged to leave Sinkiang after Sheng Shih-tsai had 'made his turn'; but they did not leave until June 1944. 'After they left, Habibullah said, 'Kashgar had only two Chinese and one Uighur doctor, as well as a few of us still training as assistants.' The Kashgar oasis, it may be said, has about one million inhabitants.

'What was worse, we had no medical supplies. Sheng stopped importing them from the Soviet Union, and the Kuomintang who took over from Sheng would send none from China.

'In November 1943 there was a typhus outbreak in Yengihissar. By February there were more than six hundred deaths, I went there myself. . . . There was nothing I could do but count the dead and dying. . . .'

We drank tea and took notes. Habibullah watched me with sad eyes. Through an opened window in that sleepy hour there echoed down a call for prayer: if I bent forward I could look up to a distant crow's nest where the *ahun* stood, mounted on a platform of high poles beyond the poplars of Yarkand public gardens. He called in a perfunctory way, for Islam in Sinkiang sits easily on peoples' ways: perhaps everything in Sinkiang had been perfunctory.

Habibullah was saying: 'We had always had epidemics. But these new epidemics were added to a terrible poverty. Theft and corruption were also a disease by now, for everyone with power took all the wealth he could.'

What had peace found to save in Yarkand?

'I came down here myself from Kashgar,' Habibullah said,

'just before the liberation. That was because the Kuomintang, here in south Sinkiang, had already collapsed: we were getting things in hand a little. I was appointed director of Yarkand hospital. By then, you see,' he added, as though wishing to make it clear that he would claim nothing for himself, 'I had about ten years of practical experience. I was strong on the practical side.

'I knew it would be difficult. I came down on horseback through Yengihissar and Kizil, along the road you have travelled yourself, and the country was dead — even to me who knew it well. Those lords of the oases were barricaded in their farms — they knew what was coming. The people knew it too, but they were still afraid.'

He paused and stared out of the window; then began again. 'I went straight to the hospital. Since the Soviet doctors had left Yarkand in 1943, the hospital had fallen to the charge of two assistant-doctors. I didn't expect to find they had done much work.

'Those two Uighurs — I had known them. They had been honest men. But they had lost heart. So many had lost heart. One of them was drunk when I got here. He was sitting on a bed in the dispensary — I don't think the hospital beds had been used for months, or not for medical purposes — and crying to himself. I think he'd been drunk for a long time. I didn't find the other at all. Not at first. Then I discovered he'd gone off with a girl who'd been a patient: he'd seduced her, raped her some said, and then just gone off and lived with her.

'I cleared up the mess as well as I could, but it was slow. Those two doctors talked to me, too. I ought to have been angry with them, but I wasn't. They told me they'd gone on working decently for as long as the drugs lasted. But when there were no more drugs they began to lose heart. Nobody ever came near them: there wasn't any medical service in Sinkiang, you see, there wasn't anyone to take an interest in them, to make them feel useful.

'And the drugs! I didn't find a single one you could use for

the ordinary run of cases. But there were stocks of about forty drugs for rare things — they hadn't been touched for years.'

One could guess at the relief of Habibullah's coming; for he would have had, as well as a certain grim determination, the gift of being able to forgive. He would have taken things into his own capable and modest hands, and people would have known they could trust him.

'We stopped the gambling and the drinking. We straightened things out. New medical workers came down from Kashgar and supplies and instruments.'

Habibullah wanted me to report some progress in the years after that. 'Now we have eight fully qualified doctors in the Yarkand oasis,' he said. 'They include two surgeons, three physicians, one paediatrician, one ear-nose-throat specialist, one gynaecologist. We also have six assistant-doctors. We have no more fear of epidemics; and we have a new hospital.' He showed me the old hospital and the new hospital: the one was a filthy old barn, mud-plastered, windowless — and the other a decent building of many windows and good equipment with some sixty in-patients, completed in 1953. Habibullah even smiled at this point. He said: 'You see, we have made some progress.'

He also said unusual things. They slipped from him like sad wisdom; and they were part of his gift for forgiveness, but also more than that. They had nothing of disillusionment, for the disillusioned do not really forgive: they merely tolerate or turn away. They are disillusioned because they cannot forgive; they are not strong enough to forgive. Habibullah had neither tolerated nor turned away; in spite of living through a time of bestiality and massacre and rape and sawn-off limbs and burial alive, he had gone on believing in the possible decency of people.

He once looked at me curiously and said: 'Do you really understand what it means when people have hope? When they have it for the first time? When they have it like money in their fingers, like water in their fields?'

CHAPTER SEVEN

KASHGAR

You now who listen
To the legend of the Chalk Circle, Recognize the verdict
Of the wise, That whatever is in question
Shall belong to those for whom it is good, so
Children to the motherly, that they should thrive
And cars to good drivers, that they be driven well
And the valley to those who irrigate, to make it fruitful

BERTOLT BRECHT [19]

I

FROM Urumchi we flew to Kashgar, a thousand miles to the westward. Otherwise a week's journey by country bus, the plane makes it twice a week each way, in six hours, allowing for brief stops at the oasis towns of Kucha and Aqsu.

Unnervingly enough, our plane flew south through the Tien Shan between green mountain slopes that were often higher than its wingtips on either side. Two or three army officers, some officials, a few peasants completed our company. Nearly everyone unfastened a bed roll and stretched out on the floor: plane travel was a new experience, and not agreeable.

In Kashgar we spent our days in arduous inquiry. We really worked hard. We looked into education and religion and co-operative farming and a great deal else beside.

But we also idled through many hours in mingling with the crowds. Kashgar is a city of crowds. It is the real capital of the Uighur people and on market days, especially, a dizzy spectacle of Middle Asian commerce. Its shops and stalls are much as you find them in any other bazaar of the Takla Makan, little else than shallow cupboards dug into thick street walls behind which innumerable dwellings are concealed; but they are more

confident and various and busier, for this is the largest bazaar of Eastern Turkestan.

Here you see coppersmiths and tinsmiths, jewellers and workers in filigree and silver and gold, makers of musical instruments, their products in polished rows above their heads in the dusty workshop — onion-bulbed fiddles whose shape and sound have barely changed in two thousand years — and a host of hatters, for nobody in Kashgar will move, if they can help it, without an embroidered bonnet or a skullcap stitched with gold or silver thread or purple flowers.

An odd thing is that there is no jade in Kashgar, although the jade quarries of Khotan are only four hundred miles away, which is almost next door in Chinese terms. Nor could I afterwards find any jade in Yarkand, closer still to Khotan: these old handicrafts had died away, people said, and for worked jade one must go to the Jade Market in Peking (where, of course, one finds a great deal of it, and much of it excellent). But it is possible that jade was never worked here.

Peasants bring in things that people need. They bring in boulders of rock salt, pepper grey, that are roped to the backs of small donkeys; lumps of ice kept over from the winter; little cones of soap shining primrose yellow in the sunlight; legs and loins and bowels of sheep and oxen, and possibly of other animals as well; lengths of leather, flayed skins, died strips of hide; firelighter shavings, rolls of cotton, padded overcoats, high boots of scarlet and vermilion leather, hats and shoes; wooden bolts for doors and stables; horseshoes and toe-caps in grey iron, finely hammered by a man who has set up his forge in the street, and has a little boy to pump the bellows; booming cattle with long useless horns; cups for tea and teapots. A tremendous busyness in tiny matters fills the place.

There is poverty; but less, it seems, than a few years ago. A Kashgar trader in cotton goods, a man of average commercial position called Nusret Memeti, told me how he and all his fellow-traders had lately gone into the co-operative movement or else into trading partnership with the State. He said that his

capital had been valued by himself, but checked by his neighbours, at 17,000 yuan (perhaps £2,500 at the current rate of exchange). This he had made over to the State at a low annual interest (since increased, however, to five per cent) and a monthly wage of 90 yuan, which is not at all a bad wage at Kashgar rates. Even before the interest rise of 1956, he had 100 yuan a month, or about £15, and in Kashgar one could live on that without hardship. We went down to the cattle market and were told that a young bullock sold at 25 to 30 yuan, a fat sheep at 20 yuan, a goat at 13, a donkey at as low as 7. A good horse might cost 150. Housing is primitive, but obviously cheap. Nusret's main point, though, was that he had much greater security than before: trade was expanding, but even if it weren't he would still get his weekly wage. I think that is a pretty general feeling among all these traders in China who have lately gone into partnership with the State. On the government side, of course, it means that China is a good step nearer to a socialist economy.

Within the city — the Kashgar oasis itself is nearly a hundred miles wide — people live in rooms round veranda-ed courtyards which in turn open off covered alleyways that wind and twist, so that all this living space behind the thick street walls is really a confusion of dwellings, and you cannot possibly hope to find your way without a guide. This manner of life has compensations, for it makes for privacy and coolness in the unrelenting heat, and it keeps out some of the swirling dust of the Takla Makan that is otherwise a plague in Kashgar. Only once or twice during our stay did the dust blow clear and let us see how high and close the white slopes of the Pamir really are.

I doubt if there is any better place to see the ways of Inner Asia. Especially we grew attached to a narrow teahouse perched above the market square: Tse and I and Mamud, an expansive Uighur from Aqsu who was attached to us as guide and general comforter and friend (attached by the city administration, that is, at the request of the Kashgar branch of the Association of Journalists), would forgather there towards

noon, and Mamud would explain what I told him I had seen, and dilate upon the general excellence of life. He is a man of generous build and nature, and has a true Uighur feeling for enjoyment. Later he travelled with us to Yarkand, and later again he took us into the Pamir; we came to know him well, and esteem him as a good companion.

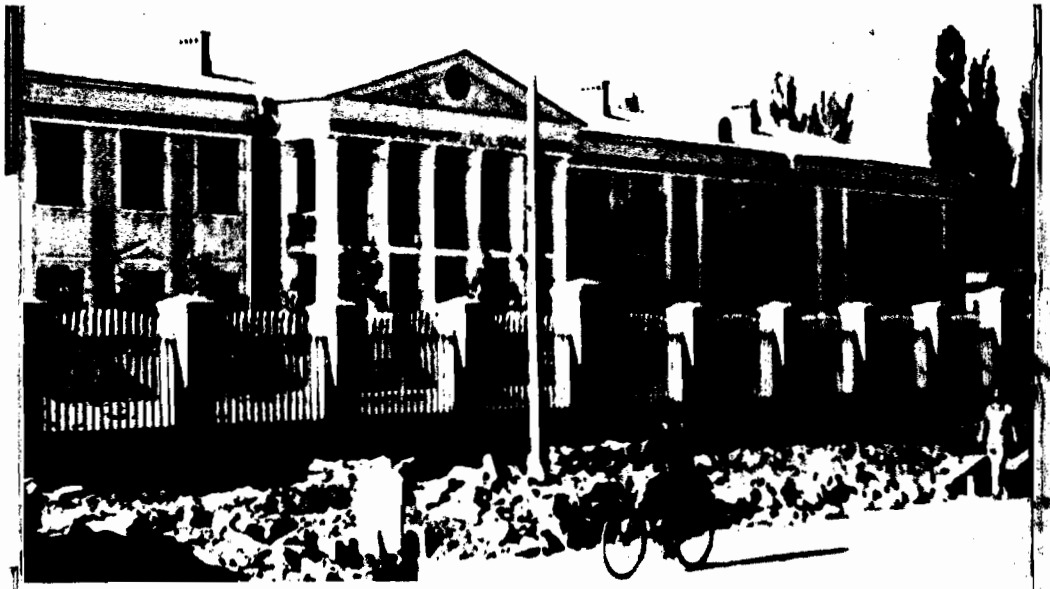
This Kashgar *chai hana* was another witness to the unity of Islamic culture. A casual open-fronted affair with tables and chairs in the dust of the street and others in the heat and smoke beside its wood-fired oven, it was crowded early and late with peasants and traders in long cotton shirts and sheepskin bonnets or embroidered caps and with a great deal of time on their hands, for the shift and hurry of the modern world have yet to strike Kashgar; although the thin end of the wedge, in the shape of a few Czechoslovak buses, is already here. Upstairs there were two small rooms with carpets and elbow-tables. Outside these ran a slender balcony, and across its palings we could gaze down upon the strolling and the gaping and the gossiping, and the women in black veils and the children hawking matches and the priests at the doors of the distant mosque across the square. One could have *shish kebab* on long skewers and yoghourt and dried melon seeds, and tea.

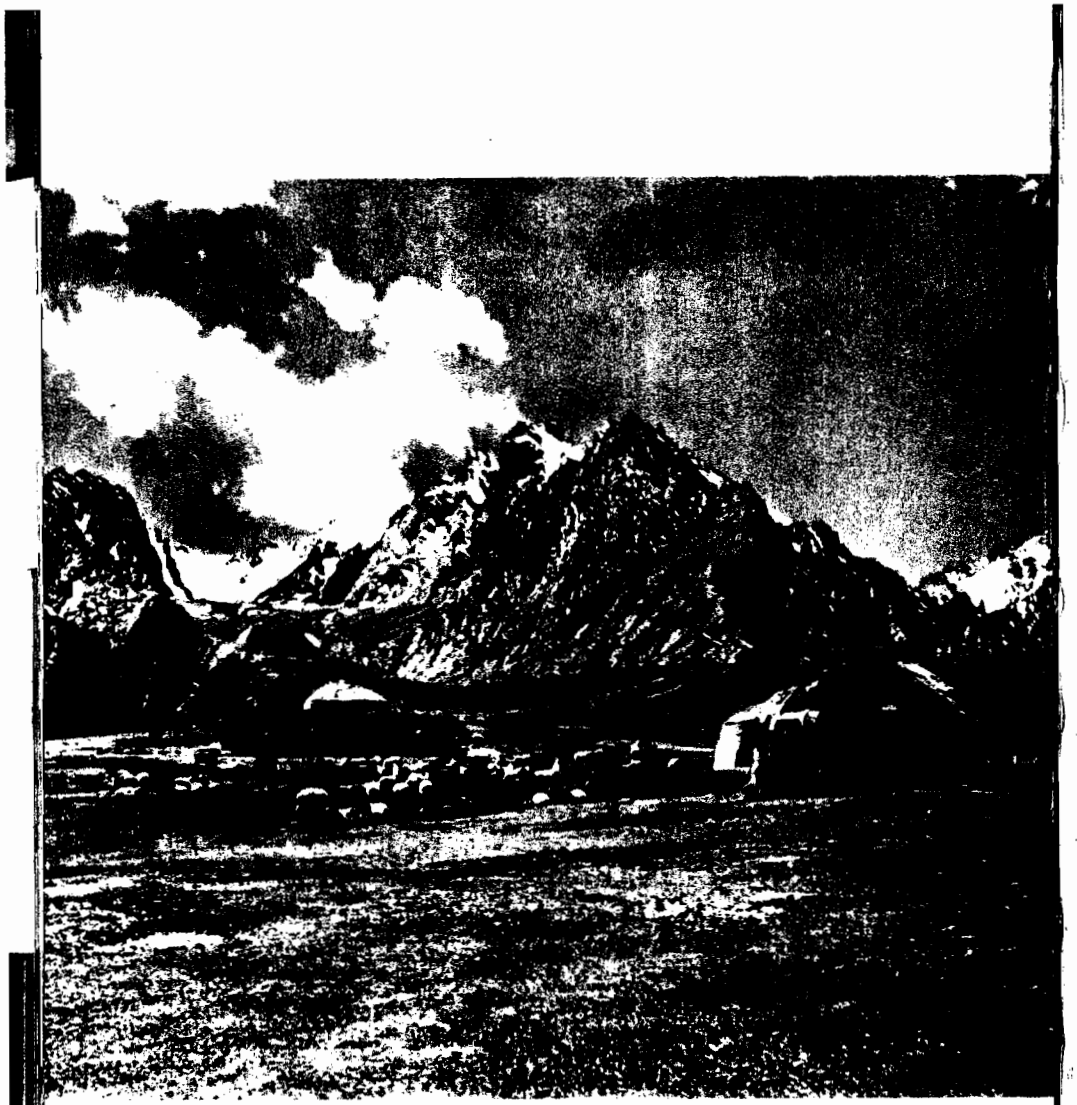
But only half a year earlier I had stayed with Berber friends in the Middle Atlas of Morocco, almost within smell of the Atlantic Ocean: there the old ways still hold, and one of them is a fondness for sitting in just such teahouses as this one in Kashgar. There, true enough, one drank mint tea or coffee; here one could drink Chinese tea or hot water, for no coffee is to be found in Turkestan. Yet in this Kashgar *chai hana* I really understood for the first time how the Arab travellers of the great days of Islam could move from end to end of their wide world, and always feel at home.

'Kappi hana yok,' confirmed Mamud of the lack of coffee houses in Sinkiang. But, he added happily, 'chai hana ba.'

Among all these crowds there were no armed men nor soldiers of any kind but for a single sentry on duty outside the

facing, above: YARKAND CHILDREN
below: CO-OPERATIVE COMMITTEE
next page, above: ILI – NEW GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL
below: THE KASHGAR DANCE ENSEMBLE





office of the city government. Even on market days I counted only a handful of policemen; and these were all local coppers — unarmed — whose homes, I was told, were in the Kashgar oasis, for police recruitment is strictly local nowadays. Gone are the days of rule by a Chinese colonial service and Chinese garrisons. The only other arm of the law that I remember seeing in Kashgar — a somewhat unofficial one — was an ancient *haji* in a flapping white gown with a great red band on his arm, heavily inscribed in Arabic script such as the Uighurs use, who stood at a crossroad near the cattle market and launched himself against trotting donkeys and lurching cattle with hoarse cries of discouragement and terror, and flapped his arms in mock dismay. I saw the old garrison barracks, and they were empty but for a handful of depot troops; and there were no new barracks. The city walls were pulled down in 1950: only a few segments remain, standing like abandoned hulks, where men had built houses against them and their removal would be inconvenient.

II

The public monuments are not much. On the recommendation of Abdul Rachman Haji, an *imam* of the great mosque whose acquaintance I made by chance and whom I later visited in his own house, I went to see the shrine of Sidi Djellal ed-din Bardat, but it proved a sorry spectacle and the door was shut upon a ruined interior. A bat flew out as I was peering in, circled wildly and scattered into a ragged hole above the door. Yet much of the green and blue tiling of the façade and dome may still be seen: enough to suggest it must once have made a fine effect of beauty and magnificence, and a link with those great shrines and monuments whose pictures Robert Byron took in Afghanistan and Persia twenty-five years ago. According to Rachman Haji this shrine of Sidi Djellal was built about a hundred years ago for a conqueror from Turfan; but we never got this very clear, and perhaps it is not true.

facing: KIRGHIZ YURTS
overleaf: KIRGHIZ STOCKBREEDER, BOSTON TEREK

The Government is now giving money for repair and maintenance of mosques, Kashgar having no fewer than 120 of them but lowly affairs for the most part; and the great mosque was in scaffolding while I was there. Beyond the shrine of Sidi Djellal and reaching in a wide sweep round it, other shrines in a ruined graveyard were also under repair: one could pick one's way among these crumbling sand-red graves and find old walls that were newly pointed with cement.

Rachman Haji, who is eminent in Kashgar church affairs — and whom I had met not by official arrangement but through his daughter, a pupil of a grown-ups' 'reading and writing' school — told me that most of the *imams* and *ahuns* had been against the new Government, himself included; but the new Government, much to their surprise, had neither molested them nor prevented them from proclaiming the Faith: on the contrary, he said, things were better than before. How much he really meant by this last remark might be hard to know: he is an old bearded *imam* of Kashgar and no doubt deep in his heart he has no love for new ways.

But he may have meant a good deal by it. He told me that upon the pilgrimage, forty years ago, he had seen many countries and many wars, many great wars; and now in his old age he was glad there was peace in the land of Kashgar. The Chinese had oppressed Islam in the past; now, he said, they oppressed it no longer. And then, he said, he now agreed that his daughter should learn to read and write (she had, as a matter of fact, already done so in secret without his consent); because the world was changing and the past was gone.

For the moment they are building the necessities in Kashgar and leaving the rest untouched: no doubt it will be many years before the city loses its poverty and dust, but also its antiquated charm. Among these necessities they have built is a large and well-appointed hospital whose Uighur director told me they had already vaccinated some 580,000 persons in the Kashgar oasis against smallpox and 48,000 against cholera and typhus: he thought that the previously common scourge of smallpox

was now reduced to five per cent of its before-liberation incidence. Cholera and typhus had practically disappeared.

There is also a new and rather splendid government guest-house where Tse and I, thanks to the editor of the local newspaper (a man, however, with whom we could make no progress: he was the only speechless Uighur we met), stayed in comfort; and near by there is a new open-air theatre where we watched one evening a performance of the Kashgar city dance ensemble, a very gay and Uighur affair. They were good enough to stage a few dances the following afternoon so that I could take photographs; and in this way we met the fabulous Kembernissa, star of Sinkiang and quintessential beauty of the land. Our speechless newspaper editor brought her along to supper afterwards, which shows that even the most careful of *cadres* can be human. She had very little to say, it proved; but then you cannot have everything in this world.

Another place of comfort and enjoyment was the public bath-house, also built lately and frequented, so far as I could tell, only by Chinese, for regular bathing is not yet an Uighur fashion. Whenever we could, Tse and I liked to end our dusty day in its cool concrete chambers and drink tea afterwards in its lofty hall. There one could sit, the tea being on the house, while people chatted in the lamp-lit shadows and sloe-eyed Chinese girls combed their glossy hair and sometimes hummed a song or two, until one by one we were overcome with love of sleep, and yawned, and drowsily went off to bed.

III

We set out southward for Yarkand in the dawn hours of a cool and limpid morning. For once in a way the dust haze had vanished, and the high white shoulders of the Pamir were clear and gleaming over pale green fields and poplar crests. They rise abruptly from the floor of the Takla Makan and their flanks seem covered with snow almost from the beginning of their climb, although this, in fact, is an illusion. We had them

in luminous procession nearly all the way to Yarkand, where the road bends eastward into the desert and you see them no longer.

In serene morning light we passed the pale rivers of Kashgar and their lush meadows: they glittered with a fresh brilliance in that delicious air, and nothing yet was blurred with the sun, nor thirsty, bedraggled, in decay. It is only then perhaps, and just before nightfall, that these modest towns and gardens can pretend romance. But at these magical hours even the braying of an ass becomes poetic: even the stink of camel dung, smouldering on someone's fire, holds vague guarantee of happiness to come. The moment may be short; it has made a power of literature.

You can nowadays motor the one hundred and thirty miles to Yarkand in five or six hours: we took longer because we lingered at small oases on the way. Beyond Yarkand they reckon another day and a half to Khotan; and beyond Khotan the road is said to be in reasonable condition as far as Cherchen. Beyond Khotan, moreover, a new road from Keriya is being pushed southward through the Kun Lun Shan to Gartok in south-western Tibet, so that soon enough you will be able to motor, if you are lucky, from Kashgar to Lhasa, and thus back to Peking by the great new highway that crosses the mountains of western Szechuan.

Along this southern road through Yarkand one may see and hear, perhaps better than anywhere else, what Chinese colonial rule had long meant to Sinkiang. The latter-day colonialism of the Kuomintang was only, it is true, a bitter end to centuries of neglect; but it gave the added twist of pain that turned poverty into squalor. Always threatening, the desert crowded farther into this narrow belt of cultivation. Here you see this in dramatic immediacy, for a little to the east, sometimes no more than a few hundred yards away, the dust-plumed desert 'breakers' seem always gathering to run upon this slender beach of green that lies between them and the hills.

Ancient Sinkiang had a much wider belt of cultivation. Some

writers have guessed at a change of climate that made the old settlements untenable; but the deciding factor seems to have been a change of political circumstance. Aurel Stein gave some proofs of this half a century ago. In great pioneering marches he uncovered the ruins of many ancient settlements, east of this southward-bending highroad, that the sands of the desert had long since covered. He showed that the ruins of Niya — far into the desert now — were abandoned towards the end of the third century A.D.: the many hundred writings that he found there had lain untouched beneath the dry preserving sand. It was here at Niya, in seals recovered by Stein, that Pallas Athene was portrayed side by side with Chinese characters, while the documents they sealed were addressed to the Kushan maharajas who ruled in Northern India beyond the Karakorum. Niya had been no miserable outpost in the desert but a place of temples, monks, soldiers, administrators, traders, and travellers from east and west and south.

Niya had not been alone. Not far off, and still far beyond the present line of cultivation, the ancient settlement of Dandan Uiliq offered Stein another picture of a lost prosperity. He struggled into Dandan Uiliq at the rate of about ten miles a day across choking sand from the Yurungkash river of Khotan; but when he got there, and his diggers had turned away some tons of sand, he was rewarded with the sight of frescoes that were still preserved in brilliant colours and that no one else had seen for perhaps a thousand years.

Here in what is now a wilderness he found the portrait of a figure 'clad in a coat of mail reaching below the knees and elaborately decorated', wearing 'wide top boots of leather' — very much after the style of those 'Carlovingian warriors' whom Le Coq and others would later find at Kizil in the north — and, almost next to it in that dry forgotten place where nothing lives, another fresco of 'a woman bathing in a square tank of water, enclosed by a tesselated pavement and filled with floating lotuses. The figure is nude except for a large red head-dress resembling an Indian *pagri* and profuse ornaments round the

neck, arms and wrists, and is drawn with remarkable *verve*. . . . Fourfold strings of small bells are shown hanging around the hips, just as seen in representations of dancing girls in early Hindu sculpture, while, curiously enough, an elaborate vine-leaf appears where post-classical convention would place its figleaf. . . .'

Still farther into the desert, Stein marked the ruined fort and caravanserai of Karadong, lying almost in the middle of the Takla Makan on the old course of the long-dry Keriya river, and suggesting that a regular trade route had once passed this way: and indeed the Chinese Buddhist traveller, Fa-hsien, seems to have taken this trans-desert route from Karashahr to Khotan in the first years of the fifth century. The date of the fort, Stein believed, went back earlier than the fourth century A.D.; and was probably abandoned before Dandan Uiliq, which seems to have had people until the eighth century. Natural changes in water distribution may have played some part in drying up the Keriya; but political and social changes played even more.

'The crumbling ruins of the deserted village homesteads which I saw there,' says Stein of Dandan Uiliq, 'and the miles of once cultivated ground which the desert sand is now slowly over-running, but on which the lines of empty canals, irrigation embankments and etc., can still be made out, were the best illustration of the process by which the lands of Dandan Uiliq became finally merged in the desert.' It was not the water that failed, but human means to use it.

To see that process one need not go as far as Dandan Uiliq; the Yarkand highway shows it well enough. Here one is driving now across the desert and now across the sown, with the two in endless competition; and the peasants who occupy this front-line of cultivation have always in their eyes, as they straighten their backs from the toil of their *ketman*, the long low line of dunes crouching at the desert's edge and seeming to move in even as one looks at them, with the sand blowing from their crests like banners in the wind. They are of no size, these dunes,

but they make an effect of quelling fear and they conceal behind their crests an ocean of moving sand.

Even half a century ago, before the desolation of these latter years, Stein notes of the Khotan oasis that:

> 'The abundant supply of water which the river carried down during the spring and summer months might bring fertility to large tracts now covered by low dunes. But here, as elsewhere along the southern edge of the great Turkestan desert, there is no surplus of population available for such extended cultivation, nor an administration capable of undertaking fresh irrigation works on a large scale.'

The same thought occurs to him when writing of his march to Niya.

> 'No doubt in ancient times' [he says], 'irrigation was carried all along the streams which cut into the desert area, and by a careful storage of their waters probably much ground beyond, that now seems irretrievably lost to the moving sands, was secured for cultivation.'

And he concludes:

> 'A strong and capable administration might any day take up the old struggle with the desert and successfully push forward the borders of human habitation. . . . But whence is that impulse to come?'

He had pushed through many stiff-locked doors to the ancient past of Turkestan, and with surprising result: but the immediate future, barely fifty years ahead but inconceivable then, would in its way be even more surprising. For within fifty years of the writing of those words the impulse would be clear and confident, and the watered fields of Eastern Turkestan would once again spread down the grey-glint river beds, long since dry, into this 'dead heart of Asia'.

IV

The inheritor of all this old glory and decline was easily found. He came in answer to Mamud's shout and peered beyond his roughstone lintel and, seeing strangers, came forth to greet us.

We had stopped our Polish motor-car at my suggestion in the slender midst of a small oasis south of Yengihissar and got out and gone along the irrigation dikes for a few hundred yards. Beyond a line of willows we found the first likely homestead. Mamud gave a tremendous shout, a most terrifying bellow; whereupon this bearded peasant at once appeared, and was smiling now as though he had looked for us these many days. There is much to be said for the Muslim habit of hospitality.

Mamud began to explain who I was and who Tse was and who he himself was, and that we had questions. The peasant made no difficulty about that; and I am bound to say that few peasants I met in Sinkiang were reluctant to answer questions: if they did not always tell all the truth I think they sometimes did, and often most of it.

This peasant had a good look at us while Mamud was explaining, and we at him. He was tall and strongly built beyond the average, and perhaps in his early sixties. He wore a sheepskin bonnet with the wool turned inward — though the heat was stifling by now — and a long off-white cotton robe belted with a leather thong, and his feet were bare and brown and tough as horn. His ragged black beard was turning grey and his hollowed face had all the leathery hardness and long-underfedness of his people, but his eyes were quick and twinkling and oddly youthful.

He gave Mamud a pleasant answer, and led us through his outer yard into the house-place behind an inner wall. By now his wife and a daughter and a son had come to greet us. We passed through a low doorway into the windowless interior of his one-roomed cottage. Though as bare of possessions as all these peasant interiors in Sinkiang, it was surprisingly clean and

neat, with a carpet on the slightly raised part of the floor and other rugs and carpets rolled up for night-time use. Water pots, slender necked, stood in the corner. These few furnishings would not have changed in shape and texture through many centuries.

I noticed a tambourine hanging on the wall.

Mamud translated: 'This man says that he used to take the tambourine and dance and sing when there was no other work and the children were hungry.' They were sitting with us now, watching narrowly the effect of Mamud's translation, nodding their heads, smiling with hospitable goodwill. In a slow and rather ceremonial way their story came out. It was a simple story, but marvellously to the point.

Until a few years ago this man had owned half an acre of irrigable land: irrigable, but seldom irrigated. Here, he said, the problem of living had not been shortage of land so much as shortage of water. You could be lucky, sometimes in the spring when high spates descended from the mountains — they seemed high and close above us here — and be sure of having a share of it. But usually you would not get a share: usually you had little water, and you had it irregularly, so that even your small holding was too much for it.

Most of the peasants in this small oasis, he said, had endured the same plight: few had owned no land at all, but very few had had land and water. Why was that? Because for all his lifetime, he said, Suleiman Ayip and after Suleiman his son Yusuf had held all the power; and they had used their power to make sure of watering their own lands and the lands of a favoured few who had served them and always sided with them. So the water had not gone to those who would best use it, and most needed it; but to those who claimed to own it. (Under the old customary doctrine of *mavat*, landowners in Sinkiang had generally claimed the ownership not only of canals they caused to be dug, but also of the water flowing in these canals.)

Mamud continued: 'He says that he would not work for Yusuf, whom he hated. His children hungered because Yusuf

and his favourites took the water. He begged with a tambourine.'

They all smiled whenever it was question of the tambourine, and nodded vigorously and laughed, and seemed to think it a high old joke. It was, I think, their way of settling with their pride.

And if he *had* worked for Yusuf the landowner?

'Then he would have fallen *chakar*.'

This word *chakar* is still evocative in Sinkiang, a word so full of misery and hunger that no one speaks it lightly.

For this had been a much decayed feudalism; of rights without responsibilities. Here as elsewhere, peasants had fallen into their landlord's debt and then had worked for wages in kind that were mere subsistence and often less than that. But once in debt you most surely stayed in debt, for a lifetime, for several generations from father to son, for ever: the landlord saw to that. From year to year you worked for nothing — for no money except perhaps a few coins at festival time, and for little food. This had been a barely disguised peonage, and of ancient origins.

This man had contrived to avoid *chakar*: he had remained on his own, and somehow had survived. His family had gone hungrier than the rest: but then they were all so hungry that perhaps it made little difference. The years passed and the oppression grew worse: around us, as they spoke of this, their watching faces grew expressionless and solemn. 'And then,' Mamud translated, 'he says that when things were at the worst, and there seemed no way to go on living, the revolution came and the Communists came, and now it is a different life.'

By how much different? In the land reform of 1952 (later than in China proper), this man had received ten *mou* of land to set alongside the three he already had; but it helped him little enough, and it was still a bad living. Good to have the land — there was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice, the glint of understanding in their eyes, when he told of this; but it

failed to solve the problem of survival. Much more, he said, was the new controlling of the water: now they had their own committee to decide the shares, and the Government, he said, had much increased the supply by digging a canal through the middle of the oasis. (The point here, of course, being that the Government was not claiming *mavat* on this water — ownership of the water by right of having dug the canal — but was providing a free supply.)

Then in 1953 he had taken his thirteen *mou* of land into a stage-one co-operative. Now they were talking of turning this into a stage-two co-operative. Did he like this idea? 'He says that his son,' Mamud came back on this, 'is secretary of their co-operative.' Already this co-operative embraced most of the families in the oasis: it was part of their lives, it was their own thing. And one saw, listening to this, that it might also be a part of their self-respect: it could mark not only a chance of material improvement but one of their own ways of closing a door upon the past.

I noticed a slender pile of books on a shelf nailed to the wall. They followed my eyes, and the peasant said that three of his younger children were at school: his son, the co-operative secretary, had already taught himself to read and write. None of his elder children had gone to school: he and his wife were still illiterate. Still? Well, they were thinking of going to spare-time studies; but so far there had been no spare time. Besides, there were the children; and the children were learning. His eyes lifted to the little pile of books and briefly rested there. All over China, in these years, there are parents for whom children are pioneers before their very eyes — enchanted eyes, sometimes distrustful eyes — of an absolutely different future. Revolution may have humbled the mighty and exalted them of low degree: now and then, upon occasions like this, one may see how it has also restored — and this in spite of bureaucratic fools, for China has her share of these, and no doubt a quota of knaves as well — a pathway to the joy of living.

We bade farewell to this family on whom we had certainly

come by chance and each shook hands formally, as due acquaintance should. The peasant came as far as his roughstone lintel and Mamud translated: 'He says that we are friends now, the people of China and those who are not the people of China. He wishes you a good life.'

'Tell him, please, that I wish him the same, him and all his family.'

V

It is even possible, in Sinkiang today, to measure these matters in a statistical way.

Serfdom had long existed here, as the Dandan Uiliq records show. Manchu writers of the eighteenth century describe it as a stable part of the daily scene. Later years brought no remission; if anything, they brought worse exactions. The irrigated areas dwindled; the population fell away; serfdom merged into slavery. Chang Chih-yi, a Chinese writer who carried out investigations in these southern oases in 1949, under the aegis of the Academia Sinica, came upon a landlord in the Kucha oasis with over two hundred households of *chakars*; and from these he was somehow taking not only labour but rent as well.[20] The case was typical enough.

This Inner Asian feudalism was dependent on civil power and water rights, even more than land, being concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of landlords; and to break this strait-jacket it was necessary to break the landlords. Yet land reform was not embarked on at once. By the end of 1952 it was complete throughout China except for the minority regions; but 'as to whether land should be distributed in minority nationality areas', Mao Tse-tung told a Tibetan delegation towards the end of 1952 ,'that is for the minorities themselves to decide. It is as yet premature to speak of distribution of the land in Tibet.' For Tibet, this was still the position in 1957; but in Sinkiang the reform was long since over. According to Abdul Ismail, an Uighur who used to be a 'middle

peasant' and is now deputy director of the Department of Agriculture of the Sinkiang–Uighur autonomous government, at Urumchi, the general work of 'land reform' — and I put it in inverted commas because this was as much a reform of water holding as of land holding — began in the autumn of 1952 and took about twelve months.

Only the peasants of the oases were affected; for there is no land-holding system — or none of any importance — among the stockbreeders of the hills and mountains. But these agricultural areas, Abdul Ismail said, included some 57 out of the 80 *hsien* (administrative districts) of Sinkiang; and these 57 *hsien* had a population of about 3,600,000 people with an irrigated area (though partly in disuse) of about 23 million *mou*, or just under 4 million acres. Other official figures gave a total irrigated area for the all-time-low of 1949 as being 18,900,000 *mou*, or just over 3 million acres, so that it appears some progress was made in restoring the economy even before land reform.

Holdings were astonishingly small. Chang Chih-yi quotes the case of two villages of the Khotan oasis in 1944 where the smallest 'farm' measured 1·03 acres and the largest 18 acres — others, as my own experience showed, had been even smaller. 'Rich peasants' in these two villages had average holdings of 11·1 acres, 'middle peasants' of 5·7 acres, and 'poor peasants' of 2·8 acres: all this was farming on a handkerchief. Water distribution gave the same sad tale. In another village Chang Chih-yi found that 17 per cent of the peasants had no water rights at all, and three-quarters of the peasants had only half the water rights. My own impression is that by 1949 things had often grown much worse than this.

In making the land reform, how had they classified the 'five village categories' — landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, wage workers?

In a small dry voice, over cups of tea, Abdul Ismail produced dramatic figures.

They had conducted a land survey. That is to say, peasant associations under Communist Party guidance, and helped by

men experienced with land reform in other parts of China, had conducted it. They had found out what families owned what land, in itself a revolutionary procedure where any form of statistical judgment must have come as surprisingly as the internal combustion engine to Victorian England. And they had classified families according to the size of their holdings, but also according to their manner of life.

Thus a man who owned land and employed others to work it would fall infallibly into the landlord category; while a man who worked his own land but employed others to help him work it would probably be a rich peasant, but might also be a middle peasant. Classification was flexible. Generally, though, a family with more than 39 *mou* for each of its members would be counted a landlord family; a family with 39 to 20 *mou* for each member would be a rich peasant family; a family with 19 to 8 *mou* would be a middle peasant family; one with 7 to 3 *mou* would be a poor peasant family; and one with less than 3 would be a wage worker family.

And the result? Landlord families were shown by this survey to compose 2·17 per cent of the oasis population and to hold 21 per cent of the land; rich peasants were 1·15 per cent of the population with 7 per cent of the land; middle peasants were 28 per cent with 37 per cent of the land; poor peasants were 40 per cent with 17 per cent of the land; and wage workers were 20 per cent with 2·18 per cent of the land. So that the poorest three-fifths of the rural population had possessed only one-fifth of the land.

The land reform itself was evidently carried out much as in China proper, by the peasants themselves, with the majority taking decisions — this majority, of course, being wage workers and poor peasants with the gradual and growing adherence of middle peasants, giving an early majority of perhaps three-quarters of the rural population and later of nine-tenths of it and more. Just over one-fifth of the 23 million *mou*, or about 700,000 acres, were confiscated and shared among peasants.

Broadly speaking, 88 per cent of the peasants received some

land, most of it going to the 60 per cent of poor and land peasants. Those landlords not considered by their former serfs and fellow villagers as 'despots' were allowed to remain in their villages, lost all their land, but were then given a small plot on the same basis of calculation as a landless worker. Although they suffered an abrupt and painful fall in their standard of living, they were not condemned to starvation. The 'despots' were either killed or imprisoned, though not their families: they numbered, according to Abdul Ismail, fewer than one per cent of all the Sinkiang landlords. 'Rich peasants' were allowed to keep all the land they were actually tilling, whether by their own work or the work of hired hands: they also kept their houses and their farming implements; and their main loss was in power and influence.

Peasant associations increasingly ran the villages instead of landlords and landlords' men. Out of these associations a pattern of self-government began to grow: water rights, above all, were their concern. Literacy, education, public health became matters of everyday interest. So of all this complex of social change in Eastern Turkestan one could say, and perhaps with little exaggeration, that it was the most significant of historical times; for it made the first complete and irreversible break in a continuity of servitude that went back into the mists of the ancient world. What the soldiers of Euthydemus of Bactria had found in Khotan twenty-two centuries ago, after all, had already held in its master–serf relationships the seed of all those miseries of which Tadeyev Habibullah and others so eloquently speak today.

Within a few years it may be difficult to trace the movement of these obscure yet potent changes that hold within themselves so much of the essence of emergent Asia. But for a little while yet, in Sinkiang, one may still see how a people in great subjection can begin to turn itself, can be helped to turn itself, into a people of self-respecting individuals. What will be found to have happened here, I think, when all the propaganda has been bellowed from one side and all the counter-propaganda from

the other, is a most remarkable piece of social engineering. And only if one sees it at something like its true value will one understand, no doubt, what beckons to the peoples of Asia in these present times.

As I wandered through Sinkiang in those summer weeks I saw that I was luckier than I had known; and that I was watching what few enough from the world outside had ever seen or could have seen — the inner growth and transformation of a backward people, the intimate mechanics of 'de-colonial' change. Statistics help, of course; but not much, for they omit the moral factor. And the moral factor in this emergent Asia is not a small one. It is not what men are, but what they wish to become, what they newly believe they can become, that will count in times like these. Given this certainty, it had seemed to me that the Chinese revolution in all its complexity and light and shade would be measured in the long run not by yardsticks of productions, by poods and roubles and percentages, but by its simple affirmation of possibility and hope by its bold improbable statement, flung into an eastern world in torment and despair, that man is also good by nature. And in Sinkiang, time and again, it seemed to me that this was right.

I first became sure of this in Turfan. I need to go back to a blazing hot day, near the desert rim of the Turfan oasis where the sand overlaps the sheltering poplars and the crumbling walls of mud, and turns the day into a crucible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

OASES OF THE SOUTH

The Peasant: But this valley has always belonged to us.
The Soldier: What does 'always' mean? Nothing belongs to anyone for always. When thou wast young thou didst not even belong to thyself, but to Prince Kazbeki.

BERTOLT BRECHT[21]

I

I WAS sitting in a sweat towards midday, putting questions to a man who was repairing a *kariz* and getting small change for my labour. It is not for nothing that Turfan is claimed to be the hottest place on earth: even this solid native seemed to feel the heat. He said little to my questions. This made things worse.

'Not very talkative, is he?'

'No,' said Tse moderately.

The peasant wore a big red metal badge on the front of his gown and so was probably a *cadre*. I said: 'He obviously ought to know.'

'Well, he doesn't seem to.'

'I'll bet it's because he won't say.'

Tse took off his glasses and wiped them. He is patient at such moments. He said: 'Whyever shouldn't he say?'

I grumbled: *cadres* could be like that, they'd pass you on to the next man higher up and so *ad infinitum*, rather than soil their brightly polished slogans with the mud and dust of situations as they really were.

Tse looked at me in mild reproach. He said: 'I don't remember that happening to us.'

Nor, to be honest after the event, do I; or not often. But I

have it, we passed two other typical phenomena of Sinkiang in 1956: straggling over the mountain trail, some walking and some riding, some carrying instruments and some carrying flags, we met a team of surveyors; and a little farther down, setting up poles, a team of telephone linesmen. Ma had said: 'The surveyors have a tougher time than we do: for we go where the people are, but those surveyors go simply everywhere. . . .'

We were at Wild Horse ferry by twilight.

Dr Ma and Dr Chen and Dr Yin will have left the north-western borderlands by the time this book appears. They will be bumping and jolting on their truck across the prairies of Chinghai, disappearing into blue distances that border on the mountains of Tibet, their passage little more than a cloud of dust and a fearful thrill for countless shepherd boys. But behind them in the hills of Sinkiang, far up where green pastures vanish into snows that never melt, two score of well-trained pupils will be hard at work, applying what they have learnt as they move from one uncharted valley to another. And that, no doubt, is what good government in this backward and long-neglected country should really mean.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DRAGONS OF LORD SHEH

'Seek for learning, though it be as far away as China.'
Hadith OF MAHOMET THE PROPHET

I

At Ili I returned to the question of Sinkiang home rule. It undoubtedly exists, but how much of it is there? Has it satisfied the nationalism of these non-Chinese peoples?

A general wish to hive off from China and form separate republics was never strong in Sinkiang. Even Yakub Beg in the big revolt of the 1870s had not thought of a truly independent Kashgaria: he might want independence of the Chinese empire, he was none the less willing to accept overlordship from British India. Even the handful of 'pan-Turanian' nationalists of the 1930s — Sabit da Mullah and after him a few 'conservatives' like Masud Sabri — never looked much beyond freedom from Sheng Shih-tsai and the 'direct rule' of the Kuomintang. Most seem to have wanted little more than autonomy — but a genuine autonomy — within the frontiers of China. (It had been much the same, vis-à-vis Russia, with the Turkic peoples living in the Tsarist empire.)

To whom, after all, could these Sinkiang peoples look for help? Living at the back of beyond, they were divided from India by centuries of an entirely different tradition and by the highest mountains in the world, and from their Turkic fellow peoples in the U.S.S.R. by little less. China had been their parent source of learning for two thousand years: China after 1949 could offer them a chance of rapid progress. After 1935, true enough, they had known a brief period of strong Soviet influence; and it may have seemed, then, that Sinkiang would

follow the same road as Outer Mongolia and become under Soviet guidance a republic on Soviet lines. Perhaps it was of this that the Ili leaders of the Three Regions revolt had thought when proclaiming their republic of Eastern Turkestan in 1944: better that, perhaps, than renewed Kuomintang domination.

What part in all this was played by Stalin and his policies during the last ten or fifteen years of his life, when Soviet ties with the Chinese Communists were weak or more than weak, and how far Stalin may have expected to become one of the residuary legatees of a Chinese Republic in dissolution, is still obscure. More probably he wanted to regain in Sinkiang no more than the political and economic influence that Russia had enjoyed there during the 1930s: no Soviet government could ignore the importance of friendly relations with the country that lay along their own Central Asian borders. Stalin may reasonably have suspected, moreover, that he might otherwise find Soviet influence pushed out by American and British influence.

Yet it is curious that the Soviet Government should have signed with the Kuomintang a treaty for joint exploitation of the natural riches of Sinkiang as late as 1949 — at a time when it was obvious to all that the Chinese Communists would triumph over Chiang Kai-shek and his western backers. This was evidently one of those instances of 'great power chauvinism' with which the Chinese Communists, while otherwise careful to give him their praise, now reproach Stalin; and up to Stalin's death in 1953 Soviet–Chinese relations seem to have remained anything but good.

There followed a sharp change for the better, and by 1954 all the joint Soviet–Chinese trading and mining companies in Sinkiang, as elsewhere in China, were dissolved. Soviet influence in any administrative or directly political or economic sense had disappeared by 1956; although Soviet economic and technical aid was by then of primary importance for China's new industries.

II

While in Kashgar I had talked of these things with Mehmeti Min, secretary of the Kashgar district government, and that tough old Uighur revolutionary had offered some interesting replies.

Why shouldn't Sinkiang follow the same road as Outer Mongolia, as the Mongolian People's Republic, and be independent?

'Our policy is not for that. And my opinion is that it is not necessary to establish a separate republic. Sinkiang has been part of China since ancient times. But in every way we fell behind: you yourself know the reasons for that. Now we have the opportunity to catch up, but we could not possibly catch up on our own. And we have a nationalities policy that satisfies people, and we do not persecute religion. This is thanks to the Chinese Communist party.'

Mehmeti Min is of course a member of that party. So I said: 'Then why not integrate the Kazakhs of Sinkiang with the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan, the Kirghiz with the Kirghiz of Kirghizstan, and so on? After all, they live next door to each other.'

'No, we want to stay in the family of Chinese peoples. It is not necessary for us to establish one big Islamic republic in Central Asia, nor to go in together with the other Islamic peoples.'

'But look at your Tadjiks of Tashkurgan. They live right alongside Tadjikistan. And they aren't a Turkic people, as you are. Why not cut off that corner of Sinkiang and join it with its neighbour?'

'Well, we have good relations with Tadjikistan, of course. But Tashkurgan is part of China. And our Tadjiks have an autonomous district of their own, and that is what they have wanted to have. Altering that would be an international question, a question of negotiations between China and the Soviet Union, and nobody has asked for that.'

He went on: 'Besides, look at the differences. The Tadjiks of Tadjikistan live in a socialist economy, they're far ahead of our own Tadjiks in every way. They're at a different stage of

development, there on the other side of the mountains. How would you put them together, even if they should ask to be put together, which they do not?'

Later on, after returning to Peking, I put the same questions to a Chinese Communist of long experience in Sinkiang who is now the director of a publishing house for non-Chinese books and newspapers. Sa Kung-liao is one of those Communists who went up to Sinkiang during Sheng's 'progressive period', but escaped with his life.

He said: 'The fact is that these small border minorities have been culturally separated from their neighbours on the other side of the mountains for a very long time. It is almost a case of two different cultures in spite of their community of language: one overlaid with Russian culture and the other overlaid with Chinese culture, and that for many centuries. The common names they have can be misleading.

'As to our policy, we are for minorities having all the rights they want, short of the right of secession; and belonging to our family of Chinese peoples.'

The terse doctrine of this lies in article 3 of the new Chinese constitution:

> 'The People's Republic of China is a single multi-national state.
>
> 'All the nationalities are equal. Discrimination against, or oppression of, any nationality, and acts which undermine the unity of the nationalities are prohibited.
>
> 'All the nationalities have freedom to use and foster the growth of their spoken and written languages, and to preserve or reform their own customs or ways.
>
> 'Regional autonomy applies in areas where people of national minorities live in compact communities. National autonomous areas are inalienable parts of the People's Republic of China.'

The minorities' publishing house of which Sa Kung-liao is chairman began in 1950 with the Mongol, Tibetan, and

Uighur languages. To these it added Kazakh and Korean in 1953. By 1967 it expected to be publishing in some twenty-five non-Chinese languages: some of these, in 1956, were still without a script.

III

But if people in Sinkiang had no great urge towards a separate republic, they certainly wished and wish to live their own kind of life.

Of home rule, I think, they now have about as much as the more moderate of Scottish and Welsh nationalists would want for themselves in Britain; although they have it, of course, within the necessary limits of a backward country whose development depends largely on a much more advanced country. While the central government in Peking retains control of foreign affairs, defence, principal communications, and general economic planning, in Sinkiang they are free to run the rest of their affairs, and to that end they receive a vast amount of help from China proper. Their freedom is a real one, and is obviously felt as such: nowhere in Sinkiang did I come across any anti-Chinese sentiment. Non-Chinese and Chinese seemed to be working well together and on a footing of complete equality of status: and the little midwife of Tekes county is no exception, I think, to the general rule. The Chinese 'settler domination' of the past has disappeared.

This building of good relations with the border peoples, while retaining the geographical integrity of the old empire, may be among the key successes of the new regime: and the more remarkable in that it had found the old empire in ruins. Those minorities within reach of the Kuomintang had cowered in subjection or risen in more or less savage revolt, and hatreds had smouldered even when the fires of rebellion were low. Those beyond reach — wild hillmen of the south-west for the most part — had been generally at war with the Kuomintang; and the new regime had needed much time and skill to persuade them into making peace again.

By 1956 the Chinese had gone some way towards an ordered and coherent federalism. Already in 1947, before achieving power throughout China, the revolutionary government had given Inner Mongolia the status of an autonomous region: Sinkiang followed in October 1955: and Tibet was to follow soon after. Elective processes were in formation throughout the country, including the minority regions. Lesser autonomous districts, framed for the needs of smaller or much fragmented minorities, were to contribute another important element in abolishing the old colonial attitudes and displacing these by relations of equality. Shih Chiang-chen, who is deputy secretary of the Commission for National Minorities in Peking, told me that by 1956 they had formed seventy-five of these lesser autonomous districts: 23 *chou* (large districts) and 46 *hsien* (smaller districts) as well as six others which fell into neither category. Within these, he said, backward peoples could grow to maturity; less backward peoples could soon catch up with the majority of Chinese.

Of the meaning of this changed relationship the Ili-Kazakh autonomous *chou* offered plenty of evidence. It was not only that many young people, like Dr Mussojan's student doctors, could now enter and practise the liberal professions; nor that the outermost inhabitants of the Tien Shan could reach a doctor if they wished. These things had been practically unthinkable before; but they would still have been compatible with Chinese domination. Yet the fact is that the Kazakhs of the Tien Shan have their own home rule within the Sinkiang–Uighur autonomous region: just as, within this Kazakh autonomous district, Mongols and other minorities have smaller autonomous districts of their own.

The general lines of policy are those of the Communist Party controlled and sanctioned by a 'democratic centralism', which is supposed to mean that the policy-makers at the top are continually criticized and watched by the rank and file organizations below. I say 'supposed' because China — and Sinkiang — are still in a phase of great social change where the real content

of democracy takes the form of a general popular urge towards well-understood objectives: whether Chinese Communists can make 'democratic centralism' work effectively in a later phase — or how far the non-Communist groups and parties that now exist will find it possible and useful to live and grow — is something that remains to be seen. In 1956, at all events, they were clearly moving both towards the establishment of democratic forms and procedures, and towards a large and systematic tolerance of non-Communist opinions.[24]

These general lines of policy are handed down from Peking to Urumchi, and from Urumchi to the smaller self-governing districts. But the Kazakh leaders in Ili insisted to me that they were not expected to make an automatic application of policies decided higher up. Should they disagree with Urumchi they had the right of appeal to Peking; and they could reject any orders from Urumchi that entrenched upon their self-governing rights (which are duly enshrined both in the new constitution and in special laws promulgated since): although, as they said, 'no such case has yet occurred'.

They raise and maintain their own police forces, but the Urumchi authorities sanction the numbers they decide upon, and the public security office of the Ili–Kazakh region takes orders from Urumchi. Budgetary control follows the same pattern. So far the Kazakhs had done little more than comment on and somewhat modify the general economic plan for Sinkiang drawn up by Urumchi (itself working within an economic framework provided by Peking). But in March 1956 they had established their own planning authority at Ili and in future, with more experience, they expected to make a bigger contribution both in policy and practice. They had already calculated some provisional long-term figures which, they said, showed that the Ili–Kazakh region (with 800,000 people in 1956) could triple its cultivated area by 1967, increase its gross agricultural product by more than eight times, and its livestock by more than five times.

Tax levels were fixed by the central authorities, but modified

locally. (Thus the Kazakhs, as we found at Balak-Su, were paying more taxes in 1956 than the Kirghiz of the Kashgar Pamir.) In 1956, they said, they would retain half their revenue for local expenditure, handing on the rest to Urumchi for general development in Sinkiang. They thought this was rather a high proportion for local expenditure, and explained it by the fact that the new trans-Asian railway would shortly reach them; its arrival would mean a great deal of new capital expenditure. Later on, when the railway was pushed from Urumchi through Kucha and Aqsu to Kashgar, the proportion they kept would be reduced in favour of the southern oases.

I afterwards took up these questions with the head of the Sinkiang finance department in Urumchi, a thoughtful Chinese called Liu Sze-mu. He pointed out that in 1949 the Sinkiang province had been in complete deficit, and that in the first year of the new regime all but a trifle of the revenue had come from central government funds in Peking. In 1951 the central government subsidy was still of the order of 70 per cent; but in 1956 it would be quite small, and should soon disappear altogether. There was, he said, no separate balance of payments for the Sinkiang region; and its planning was subject to central government planning, but once again modified by local conditions and initiative.

Its new industries would generally belong to the central government. 'Our autonomous region,' he said, 'would not have enough money to expand and run them.' The Urumchi coalmines still belonged to the regional government, but later on, when the railway arrived and the mines were greatly expanded, they would be transferred to central government ownership. The big new textile mill at Urumchi (which would shortly be producing at the rate of a million rolls of cotton a year — a roll being 37 metres by 70 centimetres) had also begun as regional property, but was now central government property. The new lorry repair and assembly plant at Urumchi (capable of thorough overhaul of 1,200 lorries a year) belonged to the regional government because it served a specific Sinkiang need.

But nearly all the state trading organizations were run by the central government; and the central government collected whatever profits they made.

Of these trading companies there were 225 in Sinkiang, as well as 20 regional companies and 400 travelling shops — more evidence, according to Liu Sze-mu, of a great expansion in retail trade. Purchasing power in the southern oases was said to have increased by 2½ times since 1949. The terms of trade were also said to be improving for this remote and backward region: figures given me in Kashgar claimed that whereas 1 kilo of iron had been equated to 15 kilos of wheat in 1949, it was now equated to 5 kilos of wheat — and it is in 'goods with iron content', of course, that Sinkiang is mainly lacking.

Another proof of rising prosperity was offered by Zakrerov, the Uighur secretary-general of the regional government, in the shape of revenue figures: taxes collected in the province had expanded from 9,000,000 *yuan* in 1950 to 107,000,000 in 1955. According to Nusret, vice-head of the Urumchi Planning Department, the share of revenue provided by agriculture and stockbreeding was steadily going down, and the share provided by industry and commerce was steadily going up. Thus in 1952 industry and commerce (including State enterprises) had yielded 53 per cent of revenue, but in 1955 over 79 per cent. He estimated the total value of industrial and agricultural production at 1,283 million *yuan* in 1957, or about 90 per cent more than in 1952: in the same period the share contributed by industry and commerce (not counting small craftsmen) would have risen from about 5 per cent to about 22 per cent.

Chang Chih-yi had estimated Sinkiang livestock figures in 1943 at 11,720,000 sheep and goats, 1,550,000 cattle, and 870,000 horses.[25] Nusret's figures for 1955 gave 14,200,000 sheep and goats, 2,480,000 cattle, and 1,050,000 horses; but Nusret said that the rate of increase was rapid now, and that provisional figures for 1956 showed much larger stock holdings. Cotton, wheat, and silk production had also climbed steeply.

A group of Sinkiang editors and writers spoke of progress in

the publishing field. There was talk of abandoning the Arabic script of Uighur and Kazakh in favour of a Latin alphabet. Collections of new poetry and new novels were being published in Uighur and Kazakh and Mongol. Folklore teams were collecting old songs and stories:

> When I beheld thy footprints beside the lake
> I wept big tears,
> So that the sand on the lake bottom
> Was dimpled with them.
> Thou art like a princess:
> Thou drinkest thy tea from vessels of silver . . .[26]

Thus sang the Lopliks of the Takla Makan a hundred years ago; and thus, perhaps it will now be found, they are singing still today.

All this goes hand-in-hand with an economic integration of Sinkiang into China proper, and a systematic effort to bring these relatively backward minority peoples into the full stream of Chinese development. But there is another agency besides peace and honest government and economic planning: the arrival in these borderlands of large numbers of Han people — of Chinese.

IV

That Hans * should be flooding into Sinkiang could be in flagrant contradiction to the fostering of home rule and minority development. But circumstances alter cases. The arrival of settlers under the old empire or the Kuomintang had usually meant expropriation for the natives. Han people flooding into these borderlands today are industrial workers for new industries, technicians and professional workers for new services, and agricultural workers for newly reclaimed land: their coming is in fact an essential condition of rapid economic advance.

* In China now this usage is universal — those we call Chinese call themselves Hans: they number about 94 per cent of the whole population of China.

Humanity is still comparatively rare in Sinkiang. Much of this land is empty of people. 'We shall need up here,' said a Han in Urumchi, 'another ten million people in the next fifteen years.' Of course it was an exaggeration: two or three millions might be nearer the mark. But most of these will come from China proper.

More people will depend on more irrigated land and more industry, and the Chinese are busy at providing both. By 1955 the Sinkiang provincial government had increased by about a quarter the all-time low of irrigated land they had taken over in 1949; but this was only a small beginning. 'Our agricultural base,' Nusret had said, 'is still weak.' Of ambitious plans for the near future I heard a good deal from the commander of the Sinkiang 'army of production' — that same Chang Chung-han who had begun 'army production' in Yenan many years before, a 'top Han *cadre*' of a solid and impressive kind.

This 'army of production' is a labour corps — in Sinkiang of about 300,000 men, mostly Han — which represents the planned transition from the years of full military mobilization to the years of peace. It began its separate existence in 1953, was withdrawn from military command and the Ministry of Defence in 1954, and in 1955 started paying its members at civilian rates. Its main tasks, Chang said, were to rebuild and greatly expand the Sinkiang irrigation system, and to found State farms on new land. As these public farms grew in number the loosely military nature of this production army would altogether disappear; and a general State farm administration would supplant it: its members would become permanent settlers. Thus the production army would serve the dual purpose of helping in the process of demobilization after long years of war, and of channelling labour to long-term projects.

It has had some astonishing successes; and its scale of planning for the future is nothing if not ambitious. I spent a day on one of twelve big State farms beyond the Manass river, on reclaimed land in the Jungarian steppe, and saw crops of wheat and cotton that Chang Chung-han said would provide the

heaviest yields in the whole of China. And yet nothing had grown here before but scrub and straggling weed, and thin pasture for a few thin cattle. So far they had reclaimed about 600,000 acres throughout Sinkiang, mainly on the fringes of the Takla Makan and in the Jungarian steppe; but they had made enough water available, in doing this, to enable neighbouring peasants to reclaim, for co-operative use, about another 700,000 acres. By 1962, Chang thought, State farms in Sinkiang would be farming on 2,500,000 acres of new land, and by 1967 (the end of the twelve-year plan), on as much as 7,000,000 acres of new land — or twice the whole irrigated surface of Sinkiang in 1949.

'That will all be newly irrigated land,' Chang said. 'But the water we shall provide will not only irrigate State farm land. It will also irrigate new land for peasant co-operatives alongside our farms. It will help the stock breeders; and provide reservoirs and big canals for transport and electric power. It will give us much more fish. It will improve the whole countryside.'

Some notion of the planning scale may be seen from the intention that the country town of Manass, little more than a dusty village now, shall grow into an entirely new city of 300,000 people by 1967 or so, linked by the new trans-Asian railway to Ili and the frontier in the west and to Urumchi and China proper in the east. I saw some of the foundation buildings of this new city and they are framed on a big scale. The hospital at Manass already had 500 beds in new buildings and 5 qualified doctors and 45 assistants, serving about 35,000 production-army workers in the neighbourhood. Chang said: 'We shall build many new towns in Sinkiang.'

He gave me facts about this work of renovation; they revealed something of the drive for radical change that is now at work in these long neglected borderlands. Thus the production army has planted 80,000,000 trees within the past five or six years; and the work continues. Mostly, as I saw for myself along the southern roads and in the foothills, they are poplar and willow and laburnum; their planting reaches back across the

centuries to those Han Dynasty plantations that were celebrated in the *Hou Han-shu* records. As to irrigation, apart from minor improvements to water courses and small canals, and to repairing and building many *kariz*, the production army's main task is in systematic control of Sinkiang rivers. Thus in the Aqsu oasis they have already built a canal with a flow of 30 cubic metres per second capable of irrigating 130,000 acres; at Korla a canal with a flow of 12 cubic metres per second; at Karashahr two canals each of 15 cubic metres per second; at Hami two canals of 8 cubic metres per second; on the Manass river ten canals with a total flow of 101 cubic metres per second; and a good many others of the same size. They have built many reservoirs and intend to build many more: the Karashah torrent, for instance, is to flow into a reservoir capable of holding enough water to irrigate 500,000 acres of otherwise desert land. Within ten years' time, Chang thought, the population would have risen to 8,000,000 people; and the cultivated area would be about four times as great as in 1949.

The same planned integration of Sinkiang with China proper — both by raising the economic level of the Sinkiang peoples and by bringing in many Han workers — can be seen in the beginnings of industry. Yilali Din, deputy manager of the Urumchi textile mill, told me that 700 of his 3,300 employees were non-Han; and the proportion would steadily increase as skills were learned. The Urumchi truck repair plant had 300 non-Han out of 1,400 workers.

Skills are being taught in new technical schools and colleges. Thus the Sinkiang Institute (founded originally by old Governor Yang as a school for Chinese administrators) had no more than 17 pupils in 1947 of whom only one was non-Han: in 1955 it had some 1,300 pupils of whom only 18 were Han, the rest being Uighur and Kazakh and a sprinkling of the smaller minorities — and, another revolutionary change, 250 were girls. Teaching was no longer in Han but in Uighur (this being well enough understood, apparently, by Kazakhs and others). Elsewhere one found the same trend: thus the Urumchi school of

mines, expecting to produce its first batch of graduates by the end of 1956, had 567 Han students but also 411 non-Han students. The excellent directors of the Urumchi Womens' Clinic, Mme Tung Lan-che who is Sipo and Mme Muhaddes Halijah who is Uighur, were proud to say that many Sinkiang women were entering new medical services: they had established 328 midwives as well as many health centres up and down the region. Most of the students at the Urumchi medical college will come from the minorities.

V

These gains should be seen against a wider background.

When the Central People's Government was established in 1949 it faced many stiff minority problems.[27] The 2,500,000 Miaos of the south-western mountains had long fought the Kuomintang. Their neighbours the Yi, numbering some 3,250,000, were still taking slaves, and their agriculture, such as it was, rested on slave labour. With the Tibetans, whether in Tibet proper or in the Chinese–Tibetan borderlands, it was little better: their social structure was hopelessly out-of-date, and their suspicions of the new regime correspondingly deep. Of the big minority peoples only with the Chuangs of the far south-west (about 7,000,000), the Turkic peoples of Sinkiang (about 4,500,000), and the Mongols of Inner Mongolia (perhaps 1,250,000) could the new regime rely on good relations almost from the start. Yet even with these friendly minorities there were many difficulties. For they were all at a grave disadvantage compared with most Hans: they were all backward peoples, although their degree of backwardness varied from the relatively advanced Uighurs to the primitive hillmen of Yunnan.

If Chinese federalism was to become real then peace must be made with all these peoples, and this meant generous aids to self-government. But self-government by itself would not be enough, for it could easily go hand-in-hand with minority

stagnation. At a time when the Hans themselves were laying the foundation of modern industry and a socialist economy, these minority peoples could not be left to linger in the ancient ways. The new regime has therefore addressed itself to the infinitely difficult and delicate task of coaxing and helping them towards higher levels of economy and social life.

It has shown in this much tact and patience; and even so it has run into trouble here and there. With the hillmen of the south-west it has striven either to win over chiefly hierarchies or else to broaden the old autocracies into more progressive organs of native authority. By 1956 it had succeeded in weaning many of these hill tribes from their slave-taking and slave-holding habits; and in western Szechuan, for instance, it was moving towards a land reform among Tibetans and the abolition of such traditional forms of chiefly oppression as the exaction of *ula*, of free labour or free gifts; although it was finding this far from easy. At the same time, in Tibet proper, it was seeking for allies in a similarly cautious effort to coax that rare and scattered people at least a little way towards the post-mediaeval world; and this too it was finding far from easy.

'In this complicated matter,' remarked Shih Chiang-chen of these south-western peoples, 'we have a very broad policy. For example, when we are trying for a land reform among a tribal people, we insist on certain guarantees for chiefs: such as that they are not to be removed from their positions, and their standard of living is not to suffer. We are now being helped by the fact that many of these chiefs have visited the rest of China, and seen that we are really going ahead, and they want to go ahead too.'

Elsewhere the new regime has run into fewer problems and, as in Sinkiang, achieved some brilliant results. And everywhere it is trying to forge new links. When in Lanchow on the way back to Peking, I spent some instructive hours at the Kansu branch of the Central Institute of Minorities: a college that does, essentially, two things — gives language and pedagogical instruction to selected minority students, and prepares selected

Han students as interpreters with these minorities. Its aim is to forge links across the often wide gap that separates Han from non-Han in these parts. They had in Lanchow college, while I was there, 1,333 students of thirteen nationalities, of whom 403 were Tibetans from Chinghai and 187 were Mongols from Chinghai and Kansu. One Tibetan I met was an ex-lama from Kansu; another was a shepherd boy from Chinghai: both were being trained as elementary schoolmasters.

An even more interesting pupil was a man called Awezu from a little lost people called the Yuko, who live in the high valleys of the Nan Shan. Dr Ma had told me about these Yuko, for he had spent part of the previous summer in looking into their state of health; and when I asked if they had a pupil from that minority, they produced Awezu. He said they numbered only 5,000 souls but were recognized as a distinct nationality, and nowadays had schools and home-rule of their own. 'In the past the Chinese said we were Tibetans. But we knew that we were not. Our traditions say that we came from India long ago, and our language is nothing like Tibetan.' They had no script for their language yet; but they were hoping to acquire one in a few years' time.

The making of scripts for minority languages is another contribution to an eventual unity of the 'family of Chinese peoples'.[28] Of about fifty minority languages spoken in China, only twenty or so have written forms; and of these only a handful are of any practical value — Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, Kazakh, Tai, Sipo, and Korean. Many scholars, Han and non-Han, are now working on the long and laborious task of improving these and devising others. At the Central Institute of Minorities in Peking, Professor Fei Hsiao-t'ung explained how they set about this.

'First of all, we solve the problem of the interpreter. We teach the selected language we are studying to a number of Han pupils; and we teach Han to a number of minority pupils. Then we put these Han and non-Han pupils together and send them into the field to collect facts. They study the spoken

language from many points of view, and eventually bring back their findings to philological and phonetical experts here. At the moment we are studying in this way seventeen minority languages which have as yet no script.

'Once we have mastered the elements of a language, we set about experimenting with a script for it. It is a long task, for there are no short cuts to a good script. Thus our present alphabet for the Yao language has as many as eighty letters. No doubt far too many — but the Yao language has eight tenses and is exceedingly complex. We are much further with the Chuang language, and for this we hope to have a good script for general publication shortly, and we are already training Chuang teachers in its use. Where minorities have their own scripts, we are helping to modernize and simplify. That is especially true of Uighur and Mongolian.

'In all this, we are building a sort of railway from illiteracy to university. Because our peoples are so varied in their stages of development, there have to be many stations on this railway, and the trains have to go at different speeds — sometimes fast and sometimes slow. And you get on to our train at the station that suits you, and off again when you've had enough.'

Professor Fei chuckled, pleased with his analogy: 'Yes, and we're also producing the machine tools of education. The rolling stock. For instance, we are training the people who are to train others. Very shortly we shall be sending a whole department of these training "machine tools" into Tibet. They will lay the foundations of secondary education there.'

VI

In its turn, too, this drive to bring the backward peoples of China into a condition of genuine equality with the Han majority must be seen against a wider background. The China of a dozen years ago could have done little or nothing for its minority peoples: it could do little enough for the majority. Yet by 1956 the Chinese had moved far towards an entire renovation of the

core and fabric of their national life. They had gathered a harvest of new experience in government: they had acquired new resources. They were still poor; but they were much less poor than a dozen years before.

In the absolutely vital field of agriculture they had shifted from an individual peasant economy, primitive in its technique, barely capable of growth, to a co-operative economy that contained within itself the basis for advanced technique and rapid growth. New towns and new industries were springing up. One of twenty-four very large scale industrial projects that were near completion in 1956, the Number One Automobile Plant at Changchung, had turned out its first lorries, and would produce by the end of the year as many as 30,000 of them. Other new plants were making generators, precision cutting tools, measuring instruments, ball bearings: the sinews of an industrial China. And in all this, too, the minority peoples had begun to have their part.

Looking for the picturesque but finding ball bearings instead, a nostalgic western traveller has complained of what he calls this 'all-eclipsing ideal of the raised standard of living'. One can see what he means: to that ideal the old ways fall victim, the quaint and the curious among them, and the meditative beauties of the mind tend to get lost in the bowl of a cement mixer. More food, more machines, more know-how: these are the songs of China now. Severe and unromantic songs maybe: yet the people who are singing them might possibly reply in words that Bernard Shaw used of England seventy years ago.

> 'What we want is not music for the people, but bread for the people, rest for the people, immunity from robbery and scorn for the people, hope for them, enjoyment, equal respect and consideration, life and aspiration, instead of drudgery and despair. When we get that I imagine the people will make tolerable music for themselves, even if all Beethoven's scores perish in the interim. . . .' [29]

Let me add that Beethoven's scores, far from perishing in China, are penetrating into places never seen before: in Urumchi, let alone Peking, they already had the beginnings of a symphony orchestra when I was there.

What the Chinese have achieved in all these things, through a process of change that will be monumental in history, they have evidently not achieved without blood and sweat and sacrifice. And what may well astonish the stranger — especially a stranger from Europe, so accurately schooled in the possibilities of mass suffering — is that the achievement has gone hand in hand with such a measure of agreement. For the Chinese now achieve this basis for a larger and better life not with diminishing popularity and thus with terror and coercion, but with increasing popularity and even with enthusiasm. No doubt one cannot guarantee the ultimate result, for man is an unreliable animal at the best of times; yet it stays to be recorded that with every solid advance towards a new society the Chinese revolutionaries, so far, have reduced the disabilities under which their opponents (or former opponents) suffer.

They have carried with them millions of businessmen and managers and shopkeepers and small craftsmen in a drive to transform and tremendously expand their industry and commerce. They have drawn into action a large number of non-Communist and even anti-Communist intellectuals. They have placated the minority peoples, calmed their outraged hatred of everything Chinese, shown them new paths of development. Above all they have liberated in millions of ordinary people the springs of energy and talent that were bound or useless in the old China. Tadji, Maiti, Habibullah, Spring Wisdom, Dr Aysa's students — a few of them have passed through the pages of this book: these and their myriad companions — who have understood the times they are living in, who have seen where they stand in the eye of history, who have decided where they want to go — are the people who guarantee, in the end, the profoundly fecund nature of China's social changes, and make these changes truly irreversible.

Can the Chinese, even so, evolve a genuine freedom? Can they master the bureaucracy of revolution? The years 1956–7 saw new and serious answers. 'Let many flowers bloom together: let diverse schools of thought contend' — such statements of evolving democracy were the beginning of a move towards an undermining of bureaucratic and authoritarian citadels of power, towards a massive airing of grievances and an admission of sins, towards a systematic growth of democratic control, that promised much for the future. What China's leaders seemed attempting, in this 'campaign of rectification', was nothing less than to bridge the gap between the harsh necessities of violent change in a much impoverished and backward country, and the humanist traditions both of socialism and of Chinese civilization.

Meanwhile their achievements are enormous. Yet to those who would still — in good faith — doubt this, they return a modest answer. Look at China now, this answer says: you knew that China must change or die, you writers and your travellers and your experts have said for years that only radical and reasonable change could give new life to China. You welcomed the Kuomintang when it seemed to stand for revolution; but the Kuomintang failed. It is we who have carried through this necessary revolution. It is we who renew and restore the civilization and the greatness of humanity in China. But if, for all that, you should reject China as she is today — then surely you would risk the futility of the good Lord Sheh?

For it is told in that ancient Chinese fable how this generous and well-meaning nobleman fell in love with the idea of dragons. He adorned his palace with drawings of dragons, and carvings of dragons, and the porcelain effigies of dragons. He spoke continually of the importance of dragons.

But when a real dragon heard of all this love and came to ask for bed and board, the good Lord Sheh was terribly upset and slammed the door and called for spears, and swore it was not *this* kind of dragon that he loved. . . .

ENVOI

LEAVING HAMI

Old Bogdo would not clear his summit for our going from Urumchi; but the weather in the valleys brightened after days of heavy rain, and the aeroplane for Lanchow was allowed to proceed. We made our farewells to the excellent Mr Hung, to Saidi Ibrahim, to Abdel Kader and other friends; and were sad in our departure.

As we flew along the northern flank of the Tien Shan — above the old caravan town of Kuchengtse and on to Barkul — there was a last glimpse of storm-racked mountains reaching far back along the skyline; and I thought again how China was not at all the flat yellow map of one's childhood but a whole continent of rolling plains and deserts and vast inexorable mountains. Here within a few hundred miles there were enough nameless peaks to keep the climbers busy for a lifetime.

Before Barkul we flew south across the ice ridge and came bumping over the Turfan depression as it climbs slowly up to Hami. Then the *kariz* of Hami pricked their way across the stones beneath; and we swung down to land.

In Hami there was no lack of dragons. Through this bazaar of dust and small change on the desert frontiers of Sinkiang and Kansu the revolution had passed with careful all-compelling hand. The trading quarter was a-flutter with the red silk banners of co-operative enterprise; and among these were many boards whose blue lettering showed that their owners had gone into partnership with the State.

It is after all the thoroughness that continually impresses. One could expect that here and there in this remote land the old ways would persist or resist: that here in Hami, with its tradition of rebellion and its tricky cosmopolitan population

and its border sensitivity and its sheer isolation, the revolution might have paused or pushed round, and left Hami to a later time.

But in July 1956, said Achmetjan the ex-cobbler who is vice-chairman of the local government, nine Hami peasants out of ten were in farming co-operatives: they had tripled the quantity of irrigated land since 1949.

Now they were waiting for the tractors; and the railway.

Before 1949 they had had no qualified doctors: now they had three or four, and half a dozen assistants. He took me to the new hospital and an English-speaking Han doctor who was in charge of it said they had four qualified doctors and four assistants.

Further down that dusty street we found a schoolmaster saying farewell to his pupils for the day. Seven years ago, said this schoolmaster, they had had no more than 1,000 primary schoolchildren in Hami: now they had 5,000. Now they were teaching in Uighur as well as in Han.

We lingered with these people, for they were the last we should see of Sinkiang. Tse bought Turfan raisins for his colleagues at the Foreign Ministry. I talked of cotton prices with a shopkeeper lately gone into partnership with the State; and strolled, after dark, through lamplit streets and stared into little booths where oil lamps guttered, smelt again the bitter night-time scent of the dust in the road and floated sleepily upon a tide of memories. I wondered if I should ever see this country again. To it the old travellers had always returned, persevering through all discouragement, time after time; and it was not difficult to see why. This savage empty country has a strangely tender embrace.

In the morning we drove to the airport through a clear and limpid dawn. Above us the snows of the Karliq Tagh sparkled in a blue mist. Hami was a long low line of poplars on the flat horizon.

Out of the desert came the earliest lorries of the day. Foul with travel, they had driven the last marches of the Gobi during the night hours; and now their drivers would eat and sleep before pushing toward Turfan when the sun was low again.

The old caravans had vanished, and the lorries had taken over. But soon the lorries would also vanish; for somewhere beyond the desert skyline to the south, sweating in sand and rock, the railway engineers were eating up those evil miles.

The gates of Sinkiang were creaking wide on their hinges of sand and sun as we took our leave that day; and flew, sadly enough, into the desert cloud.